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THACKERAY'S NOVELS: IRONY IN THEME AND TECHNIQUE

by

JULIET SUTTON

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommended to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled THACKERAY'S NOVELS: IRONY IN THEME AND TECHNIQUE, submitted by Juliet Sutton in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

Irony in Thackeray's novels is not only a rhetorical device by which the writer conveys more than the precise signification of his words, but also a view of life which interprets experience in terms of conflicting responses. Thackeray's novels are highly complex structures in which irony informs the narration, characterization, and thematic organization. The artistic complexity which he achieves through his ironic vision is a major reason for his considerable stature as a novelist.

A consideration of the role of the narrator in his novels shows Thackeray as bringing into operation the conflicts between illusion and reality that are implied in the creative process. He mocks the conventions of fiction while he conforms to them, subjecting himself to his own satire; and he is prepared, with ironic detachment, to examine his characters both as actual and as illusory beings, and to illuminate the contrast between external reality and the world he creates in his novel. The various personae he adopts allow him^{to} juxtapose different responses to experience. So his favourite pose as the old fogey with the nostalgic backward view sets in ironic tension the attitudes of youth and age, romantic enthusiasm and cynical disillusion. The varying and sometimes contradictory attitudes of the narrator complement each other to form an intricate and sophisticated total vision.

Thackeray's irony is most obvious in his social satire. Here verbal irony is his weapon, and he appropriately conveys inverted values with inverted statement, and exposes hypocritical self-

aggrandizement with veiled mockery. He writes of snobs, those who 'meanly admire mean things,' and he writes as 'one of themselves.'

As moral antitheses to the self-seeking citizens of Vanity Fair, Thackeray creates the saintly characters for whom worldly success is insignificant and love is all in all. Where contemporary criticism took him to task for his sympathetic depictions of "bad" characters like Becky, modern criticism has been more inclined to find fault with his exaltations of "good" characters like Amelia; for Thackeray shows through his irony how good intentions can act as a blight, and how selfish action can be ultimately beneficial. The subtlety of his moral vision depends on his depiction of this intricate relation between good and evil.

Thackeray has always been considered primarily as a novelist of manners. But his greatness also lies in his realistic depiction of intimate human relationships. In his presentation of his characters as psychological beings, he emphasizes the ironic contrast between the apparent and the latent motive, and explores love as both a constructive and a destructive force. He suggests, where he does not analyse, the co-existence of contrary impulses in the human psyche; so through his novels we find evidence of his awareness of psychological patterns which have since been explicitly formulated by twentieth century psychoanalysts.

A close study of Henry Esmond shows this novel to be permeated with dramatic irony, for to grasp the full significance of the story the reader must re-examine every statement of the narrator, and form an independent judgement on him and the relation-

ships in which he is involved.

In The Newcomes, where the theme is the hypocrisy and pretension of society, and the confusion of worth and wealth that has produced the concept of "respectability," Thackeray uses a stylistic pattern of allusions to fairy-tale, romance and fable that are in ironic counterpoint with the grossly materialistic middle-class world which he depicts. Again he explores the incongruous, and achieves with his irony an effect of the complexity of life.

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INTRODUCTION

"Oh, let us be thankful," Thackeray prays in one of his novels, "not only for faces, but for masks! ... Whilst I am talking, for instance, in this easy chatty way, what right have you, my good sir, to know what is really passing in my mind?"¹

What is "really" passing in Thackeray's mind is a question that his critics have not always been able to settle. The debate on whether he was a cynic or a sentimentalist started in his lifetime and has lasted well into this century;² he was the great castigator of snobbery, and yet Edmund Yates, Disraeli, and later Michael Sadleir attacked him as being a "snob who worked an ostentatious anti-snobbery to death."³ The literary vice of which he is persistently accused is inconsistency. David Cecil started a long debate by charging him with inconsistency in the characterization of Becky;⁴ Russel A. Fraser considers Thackeray changed his mind about his "heroine" as the book progressed; and he deplores the writer's predilection "to run with the hares - delightful creatures, not vowed to convention - and hunt with the hounds - respectability and all its claims and works."⁵ Mark Spilka similarly contends that Thackeray changed his mind about Amelia, because of the apparent inconsistencies in her character and in the commentator's attitude to her.⁶ The contradictions which these critics find are in the moral judgements; but there are psychological ambiguities in Thackeray's characterization, too, and we find John Dodds accusing him of not knowing his own mind in his depiction of the relationship between

Rachel and Henry Esmond.⁷ One of the major authorities on Thackeray, Lionel Stevenson, recently summed up the situation with the statement, "A vast deal of nonsense has been written about his work in recent years through failure to perceive his ironic tone."⁸

To consider Thackeray's novels through an examination of his irony, then, is a worthwhile but complex undertaking. For while it promises to provide a context in which some of the dissensions of Thackerayan criticism may be explained, it is not simply a matter of pointing out where Thackeray said what he meant and where he said the opposite of what he meant. For when we have become familiar with his constant and ingenious use of verbal irony, by which he urges us, for instance, to admire and to become typical citizens of *Vanity Fair*, we have only just begun the task of analysis.

Verbal irony is a relatively simple device of polemics by which the ironist says one thing but evidently means its opposite. This is the kind of irony employed in Jonathan Wild, where Fielding consistently praises what he despises and disparages what he admires. But the far-reaching ironies such as Thackeray constantly employs come into operation when truth is located not in one or other of the opposed positions, but to some extent in both. Here the relation between appearance and reality, which the ironist sets out to explore, becomes far more complex: as in Don Quixote, where what is held up to ridicule as delusion is also exalted as a noble ideal, and what is commended as sound sense is simultaneously exposed as base expediency.

"An irony has no point unless it is true, in some degree, in both senses," says Empson; and he describes the effect of this device on the reader: "After you have made an imaginative response of one kind to

a situation you satisfy more of what is included in your own nature, you are more completely interested, ... if the chief other response possible is called out too."⁹

This inclusive irony transcends polemics and constitutes a world view. Samuel Hynes defines irony as "a view of life which recognizes that experience is open to multiple interpretations, of which no one is simply right, and that the co-existence of incongruities is part of the structure of existence."¹⁰ Hardy's character of the Ironic Spirit in The Dynasts "sees everything in relation to everything else; as a result he can take nothing in simple earnest, because nothing is simple.... He no sooner hears A than he recollects not-A."¹¹ So Thackeray as an ironist deliberately creates tensions in his novels and sets them to work together and modify one another, but without supplying final solutions.

It is his ironic juxtaposition of incongruities that has perplexed his critics. If they have been unable to agree on which of two positions Thackeray supported, it is frequently because he supported both; if they accuse him of inconsistency it is often because consistency is a doubtful virtue in the ironist's view. To run with the hares and hunt with the hounds may be a vice in polemics and possibly in life; but the ironist can make it a virtue in literature. For Thackeray belonged to what Cleanth Brooks calls the "both-and tradition" of literature, rather than the "either-or."¹² The vacillation in his novels between points of view in the commentary, and between varying social attitudes, the ambiguities in moral judgements and ambivalence in the psychological motivation of his characters, all these can be seen as part of a total ironic vision. The contradictions which appear, in isolated instances, as indications of indecision or artistic irresponsibility show in this

total picture as moral complexity and psychological depth.

It is not my intention to make an exhaustive study of irony in all its forms, for my primary concern is with Thackeray's novels. However, where it is relevant I shall be referring not only to irony as the world view which I have described, but to some of the more specific types of irony that have been classified by G. G. Sedgewick and others. So, besides his constant and sophisticated use of verbal irony in his novels, Thackeray employs the irony of understatement in his persistent disparagement of the heroic status of his characters and his own powers as a novelist; irony of detachment in his final withdrawal to the text of Ecclesiastes, "vanitas vanitatum;" and a kind of romantic irony in his self-parody and in his recurrent reference to his characters as puppets. Then there is his own brand of the irony of fate, which frustrates the aspirations of men or makes the prizes for which they contend not worth the winning; and there is dramatic irony, not only in the narratives of Barry Lyndon and Henry Esmond, where the reader shares with the author knowledge which is beyond that of the narrator, but also in the commentary of all the novels, where the commentator himself shows his wisdom to be a finite quantity.¹³

Irony accounts for much of the particular quality of Thackeray's novels. The propensity of the ironist to see all round a character or a situation is a controlling factor in his technique of presentation and his preference for a shifting rather than a single point of view. The ironist's sense of the incongruous, of the contrast between what is and what should be, or between what is and what appears, is the basis of much of his humour and his social satire; while his consciousness of the discrepancy between what is felt and what is avowed informs his depiction of human relationships. Finally, the ironist's distrust of absolute judgements

makes Thackeray recurrently suggest, of his own depictions of saintliness and wickedness, 'Change places, and handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief?' In this dissertation I examine the ways in which irony is the controlling factor in Thackeray's themes and technique.

In my first chapter I show how, in as basic an issue as the relation of the artist to his artifice, and the authority which the writer assumes in purveying the facts of his fiction, Thackeray is already exploring the discrepancy between illusion and reality. In his narration he adopts the position of the omnipotent god whose control over his creatures is as complete as that of the puppeteer over his puppets; but by a dexterous twist the puppets can occasionally manipulate the puppeteer. He assumes a pose of lofty detachment, and then locates himself among his own characters and subjects himself to his own satire. He dogmatically asserts his own omniscience, and then calls the whole authority of the narrative in question.

As he intrudes into his own work, he presents not a single viewpoint, but a number of focuses, from that of snob to anti-snob, or cynic to sentimentalist, by which the action may be viewed and interpreted. His alter egos, dramatic personae whom he uses as seeing eyes, are most frequently of a type that will afford in themselves a double vision: Titmarsh, the outsider who is a would-be participant, vacillates between detachment and involvement; the "old fogey" who frequently takes up the narration provides, with his reminiscential vision, a contrast between youth and age, and between vivid past and placid present.

Chapter II shows Thackeray as a novelist of manners who, in presenting a picture of society, constantly delights in the envisioning of incongruities. He shows us a minutely graded system of social discrimina-

tion, so that we can savour the full piquancy of a situation where, for instance, the servants become the judges of the masters. He elaborates the worldly values of a materialistic society, and sets them in ironic tension with ethical or religious values. The scope of his novels, in time, in space, and in the number and variation of his characters, allows him a width of context in which the moment is conceived in ironic relation with the lifetime, or the individual with the whole society.

As a moralist, Thackeray is always contrasting love and goodness with the worldly values of society. He has a deep admiration for the tenderness and guilelessness of such characters as Amelia Sedley, Helen Pendennis and Colonel Newcome, as against the selfish worldliness of Becky Sharp, Major Pendennis or Lady Kew; but at the same time he is vividly aware that "goodness" can be in effect as damaging as wickedness, while even such wickedness as Becky's can be salutary. Good and evil must always be entangled, and almost inextricable, in any realistically conceived character; but Thackeray shows a more intimate relation between the two than that of two plants intertwining: he shows that the fruit of the one can grow from the seed of the other.

When we come in Chapter IV to examine the psychological motivation of his characters at levels deeper than their aspirations to be successful or to be good or otherwise, we find Thackeray again exploring discrepancies. Although he concentrates his attention on surfaces, it is with a deep perception of the relation of the conscious to the subconscious. As ulterior motives are his special study when he contemplates social behaviour, so forbidden subconscious drives and ambivalent emotions preoccupy him when he considers human beings in their more intimate relationships. So he can show us the conflicting feelings of grief and

joy and guilt in Rachel Esmond at the death of the husband whom she has ceased to love. The relations of parent and child are charged with hate as well as love, and their identity of interest frequently turns into rivalry. Love itself, though it can be considered as the summum bonum, can change its face and become rapacity.

Close studies of individual novels, which constitute the latter part of my thesis, give a more detailed view of the workings of these ironies, and show how Thackeray's technique is related to his subject matter. In Henry Esmond he achieves, through a dramatic irony in which every statement must be re-examined with an awareness of the bias and limited knowledge of the narrator, an effect of the endless ambiguity of human relationships. In The Newcomes he provides a further ironic dimension by his use of motifs from fable and fairy-tale to tell a story that is principally about fumbling in a greasy till, and by his invocation of the poetic justice of romance in a novel that has shown how it is the cheats and hypocrites who prosper.

Truth is an elusive quality in Thackeray's writing, where every assertion involves its own opposite. The satirist scourges greed and pretension, but includes himself and the whole world in his satire and so leaves no place for retreat. The moralist in exalting virtue seems to indicate a direction, but that too may turn out to be a crooked path that leads to hell instead of heaven. The psychologist examines human relations, and finds the shadow even in the tenderest of attachments. Truth or reality resides not in any one of the positions, but only among the contradictions. Thackeray's novels duplicate the complexity of life, where there are similarly no final answers. His realism depends on his irony: and as we can perceive depth only when we use both eyes, so the double vision of the ironist presents a three-dimensional reality.

I

IRONY IN ARTISTIC ATTITUDE

Thackeray, unlike the modern novelist, is not "refined out of existence" in the pages of his novels:¹ the author is an unmistakable though elusive presence there, ready on occasion to speak directly to the reader, to comment on the characters, and even to expose the illusion by which they are invested with some measure of reality. He enters his work as an ironist, for he intends the reader to challenge the validity of the explicit judgements of this authorial commentator; and he is also ready to call in question his own authority as the creator of a fictional illusion, since as he builds this illusion he simultaneously exposes it. The reader is invited to consider Becky Sharp and her creator alternately as confined within the pages of the volume, and as living beings whom he might meet on the street outside.

Thackeray deliberately explores the discrepancy between illusion and reality in his novels. In his conception of his role as a novelist among his contemporaries, in his estimate of the value of the artistic endeavour, and as he enters his work as commentator or narrator, we find him constantly examining the contrasts between the experience of actual life and the experience of fiction, and setting the two in tension. With the shifting viewpoint of the ironist, he presents a whole range of roles for the creator of the fictional world, from omniscient god to ignorant scandal-monger, from total involvement to complete detachment, from sentimental indulgence to cynical disgust. In a consideration of the irony in his artistic attitude, I intend to demonstrate this range,

and, in the context of modern criticism of the novel, to examine the various effects of the pervading authorial presence in Thackeray's works.

Among contemporary writers of fiction Thackeray created for himself the role of Eiron. Like a kind of literary Socrates, he made a practice of scoring off the excesses of other novelists, while being always ready to admit his own lack of artistry. His initial literary impulse was towards burlesque and parody rather than towards independent creation; and his tendency was to define his own position in terms of negatives, as being the opposite of what he considered the exaggerations of Bulwer, Ainsworth, Disraeli, and the writers of silver-fork, Gothic, or "pulmonary" romances.

So his early work was appropriately for Fraser's Magazine, which under the editorship of Maginn was a battleground for literary controversy; and he first gained notice by writing in the person of the footman Yellow-plush, who with his outrageous orthography is a kind of anti-author, "a littery man" belonging to a "blaggerd employment" (I, 166). Thackeray's first extended piece of fiction, Catherine, again took the form of parody, this time ridiculing the vogue for the Newgate novel. In many ways Novels by Eminent Hands, the series of parodies of Bulwer, G.P.R. James, Disraeli, Cooper and others, which appeared in Punch in 1847, was as much preparatory for the style of Vanity Fair as The Book of Snobs was preparatory for its content. For Thackeray did not give over parody of other novels when he began writing his own. In chapter six of Vanity Fair a long passage, much of which Thackeray later omitted, undertakes to tell the same story "in the genteel, or in the romantic, or in the facetious manner." And so in the silver-fork version all the characters are titled and speak a fashionable jargon of French, English and German, while in the terrific version

the characters are criminals and converse in the flash language popularized by the Newgate novels (VF, 60, 882). Thackeray subsequently abandoned this kind of direct parody in his novels, though even in The Newcomes a chapter opens with the scene of two horsemen on a November afternoon which was the trademark of G.P.R. James (Nc, 669); but he continued to see his novels, and the kind of situations and characters he was creating, in terms of their contrast with the characters and situations which other novelists created.²

Like Fielding and Jane Austen, two other great ironists who similarly found their initial creative impulse in parody, he fastened on those aspects of contemporary fiction which seemed to him to be in most flagrant conflict with the plain facts of everyday life. Determined chroniclers of the probable, they set out to ridicule what was improbable in the fictions of others. Readers of romance, they felt, were forced to credit much that might well strain belief, but that they had been trained in the exercise by frequent repetition. These debunkers among the novelists set out to eliminate much of the conventional and improbable matter of previous fictions, and to establish a new and closer relation of the novel to the average person's daily life. Fielding found in Pamela an over-elaborate harping on virtue that protracted a seduction through hundreds of pages and unlikely events, and he ridiculed both its prurience and its improbability in Shamela and Joseph Andrews. Jane Austen similarly mocked the horrific incidents and startling co-incidences of the Gothic novel in Lady Susan and Northanger Abbey. And Thackeray, in Novels by Eminent Hands, parodied the bombast of Bulwer's romances, the multi-cultural pretentiousness and far-fetched elegance of Disraeli's, and the hero's impossible feats

of daring in Lever's. In this repeating pattern the practitioner of what Frye calls the low mimetic mode ridicules the practitioner of high mimetic.³ So Thackeray, who presents heroic or diabolic characters in his parodies, insists on the down-to-earth normality of the characters in his own novel: "we are only discoursing at present about a stock-broker's family in Russell Square, who are taking walks, or luncheon, or dinner, or talking, or making love as people do in common life, without a single passionate and wonderful incident to mark the progress of their loves" (VF, 60). At first he was even diffident about calling Vanity Fair a novel at all, but described it as "Pen and Pencil Sketches of English Society;" finally he settled for a subtitle which expressed his contradictory attitude, "A Novel without a Hero."

But however he may mock the unlikely creations of other novelists, he is conscious that he himself is purveying fictions which similarly require suspension of disbelief. There is here a basically ironic artistic attitude, that of the writer who is working in a genre which he is simultaneously mocking as unreal. It seems that he cannot wholly give himself to the creation of an illusion, for his particular kind of artistic self-consciousness makes him constantly aware of the contrast between fact and fiction. He creates for himself a position between the two, where his characters are real in comparison with the improbabilities of other writers, but still illusory in relation to the people of the actual world whom he tries to make them resemble. Many of the variations in Thackeray's relation as author to his characters, which I shall be discussing later, can be traced to this basic ambivalence in his artistic standpoint.

It is worth examining some of the devices and conventions of

fiction which Thackeray tried to abandon in favour of a more probable realism. His principle was to renounce the glamorous, the exciting, the bombastic, and the tear-jerking wherever they seemed to be in excess of what normal life provides. He similarly avoided the obvious devices of technique, such as neatly-resolved plots or over-literary dialogue.

He has no time for the novelistic convention of the culminating marriage and living "happily ever after:"

As his hero and heroine pass the matrimonial barrier, the novelist generally drops the curtain, as if the drama were over then: the doubts and struggles of life ended: as if, once landed in the marriage country, all were green and pleasant there: and wife and husband had nothing to do but link each other's arms together, and wander gently downwards towards old age and perfect fruition. (VF, 319)

Thackeray, on the other hand, dwells on the matrimonial miseries of Clive Newcome and Amelia: and of all his major characters, only Pendennis and, more doubtfully, Henry Esmond are allowed to be married with any suggestion that their troubles are other than just beginning afresh.

In fact, in all his novels Thackeray avoided the kind of ending that suggested any final resolution. The vicissitudes of Becky's fortunes are by no means over at the end of Vanity Fair, nor are Amelia's troubles ended by her seeing the error of her ways and marrying Dobbin. The last number of The Newcomes begins with the reflection: "We are ending our history, and yet poor Clive is but beginning the world" (937). The feeling that Thackeray's novels are parts of life, rather than creations which have their own independent life, finite within the compass of the volume, is reinforced by his device of continuing family histories through sequences of novels, and of reintroducing the personnel of one novel into the next. His novels give the impression of being slices of life, because of what Geoffrey Tillotson calls their "buffer-

less endings" and "lack of edged shape."⁴

Because of its improbability, Thackeray disdained the usual stock in trade of the novelist: the use of the romantic incident which is usually combined with a considerable stretching of the long arm of coincidence. Esmond, in giving the history of his military campaigns, refuses to romanticize his exploits:

The only blood which Mr. Esmond drew in this shameful campaign, was the knocking down an English sentinel with a half-pike, who was offering to insult a poor trembling nun. Is she going to turn out a beauty? or a princess? or perhaps Esmond's mother that he had lost and never seen? Alas no, it was but a poor wheezy old dropsical woman, with a wart on her nose. (HE, 201)

He is also opposed to traditional suspense patterns. Of course to some extent we do keep reading a Thackeray novel to see what happens next, but this motive is less in his novels than in most. When the long-foreseen collapse of Colonel Newcome's banking venture actually happens, the author does not allow the reader to congratulate himself on his perspicacity.

Yes, sir or madam, you are quite right in the opinion which you have held all along regarding that Bundelcund Banking Company, in which our colonel has invested every rupee he possesses, Solvuntur rupees, &c. I disdain, for the most part, the tricks and surprises of the novelist's art. Knowing, from the very beginning of our story, what was the issue of this Bundelcund banking concern, I have scarce had patience to keep my counsel about it. (Nc, 901)

At the outset of a book he frequently refers to the state which the central character has reached after its close. So in the second chapter of Philip the author tells us that this is no "pulmonary romance" in which the hero is to die of consumption at the end, and goes on:

No, no; we will have no dismal endings. Philip Firmin is well and hearty at this minute, owes no man a shilling, and can enjoy his glass of port in perfect comfort.... That Philip shall have his trials, is a matter of course - may they be interesting, though they do not end dismally! (Ph, 13)

As in classical tragedy, the interest lies not in what happens, for the audience knows this already, but in how it happens. The ending that is in sight from the beginning gives a further ironic perspective.

As he avoids romantic resolutions and co-incidences, so he avoids obviously climactic events. The actual battle of Waterloo is only briefly described in Vanity Fair. "Our place is with the non-combatants" (VF, 361), he says, and rather than follow the soldiers into action he prefers to stay in Brussels with their wives. "Had I the pen of [Sir Archibald Alison, Carlyle, G.P.R. James, or various others whose pens he concludes he does not possess]..." - this is his usual formula for avoiding the description of a battle. "In a word, I would have History familiar rather than heroic," Esmond sums up (HE, 14).

But it is not just the great events of history that Thackeray omits to describe. He has a way of avoiding the dramatic representation even of the incidents of his own invention, - particularly those which involve physical action. Considering, for instance, the number of duels that are threatened or consummated in his novels, it is surprising how few are actually described.⁵

He very often avoids showing great emotional upheavals, too. Love scenes, particularly (and increasingly as he got older), he cuts short, or omits altogether, on the easy assumption that reader and writer equally know what goes on on these occasions. We never hear Harry Warrington propose to Lady Maria, for instance, though his proposal has considerable bearing on the plot of The Virginians.

Whole chapters might have been written to chronicle all these circumstances, but à quoi bon? The incidents of life, and love-making especially, I believe to resemble each other so much, that I am surprised, gentlemen and ladies, you read novels any more. (Vns, 186)

Love is seldom evoked as the grand passion familiar in literature - it is rather "the old story," and by no means a mortal affliction if not requited. "Men have died from time to time and worms have eaten them, but not for love:" such is the dominant mood in the depiction of the loves of the various central characters in the novels: "I never knew a man die of love, certainly, but I have known a twelve-stone man go down to nine stone five under a disappointed passion, so that pretty nearly a quarter of him may be said to have perished: and that is no small portion. He has come back to his old size subsequently..." (Pnd, 165). This treatment of emotion in terms of physical pounds and ounces is typical of Thackeray's ironic handling of passion.

As a writer in the low mimetic mode, Thackeray is always solicitous to disclaim heroic stature for his central characters.⁶ It is not only Vanity Fair that is a novel without a hero: Pendennis "does not claim to be a hero, but only a man and a brother" (Pnd, 977); Clive Newcome is not to be taken as a hero either, and Philip, we are told, is by no means set up as an example, but only 'drawn faithfully, as Nature made him' (Ph, 210). Their abilities no more entitle them to heroic status than their moral qualities: Pendennis is a successful writer, but no genius; Philip Firmin and George Warrington are unable to support themselves by their own labours; and Clive Newcome's gift as a painter is only moderate, and not in accordance with the romantic ideal of the artist:

If Mr. Clive is not a Michael Angelo or a Beethoven, if his genius is not gloomy, solitary, gigantic, shining alone, like a lighthouse, a storm round about him, and breakers dashing at his feet, I cannot help myself; he is as heaven made him, brave, honest, gay, and friendly, and persons of a gloomy turn must not look to him as a hero. (Nc, 513)

Thackeray is often reminding us that his central characters are as

'nature' or as 'heaven' made them; for he is concerned to contrast the kind of characters and action he presents with those of other novelists whose tendency is to idealize if not to distort nature. So convincing is the probability of the world he creates that in Barry Lyndon, where he shows a woman actually in a situation typical of the terrific novel - a lady in durance vile and tyrannized by an unmitigated villain - , he can still make her appear ridiculous for playing the role of a romantic heroine.

So in writing his novels Thackeray on principle chose the less exciting or the less romantic alternative, in character, action, structure, and so in the general atmosphere of his books; for to him the fictions of his contemporaries appeared to violate truth, to give a distorted form of the kind of reality which he felt it was the novelist's duty to try to reproduce. "I persist that the proper thing in life is to call a poker a poker," he says in his letters (II, 288),⁷ and he applied the maxim particularly to novel-writing. He admired Dickens's great powers of invention, but he found fault with him in his tendency to concentrate on the eccentricities rather than the norms of character, gesture and action:

I quarrel with his Art in many respects: wh. I don't think represents Nature duly; for instance Micawber appears to me as an exaggeration of a man, as his name is of a name. It is delightful and makes me laugh: but it is no more a real man than my friend Punch is: and in so far I protest against him... - holding that the Art of Novels is to represent Nature: to convey as strongly as possible the sentiment of reality - in a tragedy or a poem or a lofty drama you aim at producing different emotions; the figures moving, and their words sounding, heroically: but in a drawing-room drama a coat is a coat and a poker a poker; and must be nothing else according to my ethics, not an embroidered tunic, nor a great red-hot instrument like the Pantomime weapon. (Letters, II, 772)

It is a question of the tone at which the novel is pitched.

Thackeray saw other novelists in their various ways as presenting life

primarily in its moments of intensity or exaltation; emotions are overwrought, characters overdrawn, action overdramatized, compared with what a Victorian gentleman was likely to experience. Such novels are pitched higher than life. And as Thackeray found something ridiculous and even dishonest about Bulwer's affecting to write with intimate knowledge of the criminal, so he found a certain falsity in novels presenting material that was far outside the experience of the writer and his readers. We find him scrupulously avoiding extremes, aiming at the depiction of men rather than heroes, an even tenour of life rather than hectic upheavals, relative goodness and badness rather than absolute good and evil; and all to be related in the conversational tone rather than the recitative. It is evident, then, throughout his novels as well as in his parodies and critical statements, that Thackeray considered himself as having a corrective role to perform among novelists. He felt that truth was best served by the presentation of a familiar every-day reality; and if he could not reproduce the actual pitch of this reality, he would rather pitch too low than too high.

His determination not to idealize life is one reason for his constant insistence on the mean motivation of men, as opposed to the heroic or the villainous, an insistence that earned him the reputation of being a cynic. This too is part of his artistic principle: "One is bound to speak the truth as far as one knows it;... and a deal of disagreeable matter must come out in the course of such an undertaking" (VF, 95). And he never lets us forget that world which he presents is a fallen world. As A.E. Dyson has put it, in an article on Vanity Fair as "an irony against heroes," "Thackeray claims, as a novelist, the right to be a total realist, and realism meant, for him, coming to terms with a radically unheroic world."⁸

The use of the low pitch has a certain intensity of its own, and Thackeray on occasions is a master of this effect. Irony is commonly associated with an attitude of detachment and objectivity; and it is generally assumed that though this may be a desirable attitude for the expression of ideas, subjective involvement is more suitable when it comes to conveying emotion. Arthur Sidgwick, in an article on irony of 1907, took issue with this common assumption, and showed how some of the deepest feelings can be conveyed only by using irony of understatement: "It often comes about that while the lower stages of feeling can be expressed, the higher stages must be suggested. In the ascent the full truth will do; but the climax can only be reached by irony."⁹ In those scenes where Thackeray successfully conveys deep emotion, it is because he is a master of understatement. The most memorable and effective sentence in all his writing, that at the end of the Waterloo number of Vanity Fair, owes its impact largely to the fact that the major piece of information in it is conveyed in a subordinate clause:

No more firing was heard in Brussels - the pursuit rolled miles away. Darkness came down on the field and city: and Amelia was praying for George, who was lying on his face, dead, with a bullet through his heart. (VF, 406)

In the same way, in the eloquent passage on the death of the Duke of Hamilton in Esmond, the event gains in emotional intensity by Thackeray's focus on the diminution of great aspirations to insignificance.

Esmond thought of the courier, now galloping on the north road to inform him, who was Earl of Arran yesterday, that he was Duke of Hamilton today, and of a thousand great schemes, hopes, ambitions, that were alive in the gallant heart, beating a few hours since, and now in a little dust quiescent. (HE, 388)

In another successful scene of pathos, the death of Colonel Newcome, Thackeray achieves his effect by refraining from magnifying the scene.

The chapel bell tolls "at the usual evening hour," his dying words are spoken "quickly," his very death, as he acknowledges his presence to the master, is presented as the mere extension of a habit. By contrast the most blatantly unsuccessful death scene in the novels is that of Helen Pendennis, where the writer dwells on the emotion, draws out the prayers, and tries to magnify the effect by the use of repetition:

"and once more, oh, once more, the young man fell down at his mother's sacred knees, and sobbed out the prayer... 'for ever and ever'" (Pnd, 736).¹⁰

There are scenes in the novels where Thackeray successfully matches the emotion and the extent of its expression: Harry's reunion with Rachel at Winchester with the invocation of the 126th psalm is the best example; but nearly always Thackeray achieved his successful emotional effects when he was conscious that it is not the highest pitch that conveys the strongest feeling. By another reversal, he often exploits the converse of this situation, and suggests the weakness and transience of an emotion by overstatement. Witness the empty effusions of Blanche Amory, or Pen's Byronic passion for the Fotheringay, and the summary comment, "When a gentleman is cudgelling his brain to find any rhyme for sorrow, besides borrow and tomorrow, his woes are nearer at an end than he thinks for" (Pnd, 167).

In the full practice of Thackeray's principle of understatement, however, there is the obvious danger that the novel may be deficient in interest and intensity. To avoid extremes of action and emotion is to risk dullness. Thackeray certainly does not always escape this danger; the second half of The Virginians, for instance, with its lack of action and dramatized emotion, becomes little more than "merely a matter of

going on and on"¹¹ - to use the phrase with which Leavis dismisses the whole of Thackeray. But where this is true of Thackeray's writing it is due to other defects, to a failure in invention and creative energy, as in The Virginians, rather than to a strict adherence to his principle of fictional understatement. So far as he put this principle into practice its effect was to give, besides the air of probability, a generally muted tone to the novels, a tone suited to his pervasive melancholy and his theme of Vanitas vanitatum.

We should beware of taking Thackeray too much at his word. It is the role of the Eiron to underrate his own performance, and so Thackeray likes to tell us that he writes of nothing more exciting than "a stock-broker's family in Russell Square;" but of course he does practise the tricks of his trade (his novels would scarcely be readable, if possible at all, if he did not): and he practises them with considerable dexterity. Becky, Major Pendennis, and Lady Kew are, after all, strong stuff; so are Amelia and Helen Pendennis, in their own way. As Mario Praz admits in his study of The Hero in Eclipse in Victorian Fiction, Thackeray's characters have a facility for "fixing themselves upon the page."¹² There is plenty of physical action in Esmond, and even more in Denis Duval; there is an almost melodramatic intensity about such scenes as that in which Rawdon finds Becky entertaining Lord Steyne, and much highwrought emotion in the confrontations of Rachel and Henry Esmond; and the scene in the boarding house in Philip, in which staid retired officers are exchanging challenges over port in the dining-room while their wives are exchanging insults over tea in the drawing-room, is as carefully composed as a scene in a Jonson comedy.

Trollope was perhaps closer to practising what Thackeray preached

than Thackeray was himself. His plots are more carefully wrought than Thackeray's,¹³ but in his attitude to character he closely followed Thackeray's lead. He too is occupied with the contrast between the personages of fiction and those of actual life:

Perhaps no terms have been more injurious to the profession of the novelist as those two words, hero and heroine. In spite of the latitude which is allowed to the writer in putting his own interpretation upon these words, something heroic is still expected; whereas, if he attempt to paint from nature, how little that is heroic should he describe!¹⁴

He himself, like Thackeray, chooses to delineate the natural rather than the heroic, and he does it with a minuteness in the analysis of their inner motivation and an attention to detail which Thackeray does not attempt. But though his characters may be more probable than Thackeray's, they lack intensity. In David Cecil's phrase, "Trollope imagined truly, but he imagined faintly."¹⁵

In considering the irony of literary understatement that pervades Thackeray's works in the form of a constant contrast of his own low-keyed creations with the high-pitched fictions of others, we have noted only a part of the irony of his artistic attitude. There is also the contradiction that, in spite of being a dedicated artist, he has at the same time a genuine and deep-seated scepticism about the value of the literary endeavour. In the conduct of his novels he is in earnest pursuit of the truth as he knows it. But as he becomes a self-conscious artist he finds he cannot always convince himself, and he becomes distrustful not only of the exaggerated fictions of others, but of his own as well: they may be creations, but they may equally be fabrications.

This doubt found expression in a certain hostility to his own profession. In the "literary status" debate of the '30's and '40's, he was constantly poking fun at "the absurd outcry about neglected men

of genius" (Letters, III, 390), and most of the writers depicted in Pendennis are either malicious, or snobbish, or mentally deficient. His letters are full of depreciation of the novelist's craft. "I often say I am like the pastry-cook, and don't care for tarts, only bread and cheese" (IV, 158), he wrote to Trollope. All his career he had been trying to make his tarts as much like bread and cheese as possible, but he had not satisfied himself; and so he contemplated "getting out of novel-spinning, and back into the world." Writing history, he sometimes thought, would be a more worthy endeavour than writing fiction. "It is only acting, our business," he wrote in 1852; "we are but quacks and mountebanks more or less painted gay or solemn" (Letters, III, 52).

At the same time, he was obviously a serious and painstaking artist, who brought all his skill to bear on the problems of mimesis which face a novelist, and who took a pride in producing a complex structure such as Vanity Fair or a careful dramatic realization like Esmond; and he also believed fervently in the beneficial role of the artist in society. J.J. Ridley, the painter, is glorified in a rhetorical passage of adulation in The Newcomes:

Out of that bright light looked his pale thoughtful face, and long locks and eager brown eyes. The palette on his arm was a great shield painted of many colours: he carried his maul-stick and a sheaf of brushes along with it, the weapons of his glorious but harmless war. (Nc, 850)

Dickens found fault with Thackeray's attitude of depreciation of the novelist's business, which he chose to regard - charitably as he thought - as a pose: "We had our differences of opinion," he wrote in his obituary for Thackeray. "I thought that he too much feigned a want of earnestness, and that he made a pretence of under-valuing his art, which was not good for the art that he held in trust."¹⁶ But Thackeray

is capable of having two contrary attitudes at once, neither of which is feigned. As Dickens saw, his artistic earnestness was genuine, but so was the scepticism arising from his doubt as to how far the truth can be located in a fiction.

Thackeray's scrupulous honesty did not allow him to conceal this doubt: he is reluctant to seem to deceive his reader more than necessary. It is typical of the ironist that he 'no sooner hears A than he recollects not-A:' so Thackeray no sooner creates an illusion than he reminds us it is an illusion. He is noticeably diffident about asserting the truth of his fictions even within the bounds of the novel itself. "Now for the Poet," says Sidney, "he nothing affirmes, and therefore never lyeth. For, as I take it, to lye is to affirme that to be true which is false."¹⁷ But Thackeray is shy of taking the full licence which Sidney's maxim gives to the creator of a fictional illusion. This temperamental diffidence is transformed in the novels into an ironic questioning of his own authority which involves writer, characters and reader in a set of shifting relationships. To make the complete transition into a world of illusion that is required of the fully "dramatic" novel did not always suit his purpose.¹⁸ For the relation between illusion and reality fascinated him to the extent that he often adopted a position at some point between the two.

"The air of reality (solidity of specification) seems to me the supreme virtue of a novel," said Henry James.¹⁹ And another defining modern authority on the novel, Ortega y Gasset, elaborates the sentiment. "The author must build around us a wall without chinks or loopholes through which we might catch, from within the novel, a glimpse of the outside world."²⁰ But Thackeray's specifications are often far from

solid, at least so far as narrative authority is concerned; and he constantly pierces his wall with chinks and loopholes. He talks of his characters as puppets, as mere figments of his invention; he suggests that the reader might invent the novel's ending to suit himself; he talks of the reader's buying the monthly yellow-covered parts of the novel, and suggests that he may at that moment be falling asleep over the perusal of them in a club armchair. In fact Thackeray often takes us to a vantage point on top of the wall, where we can survey at once the world of the novel and the outside world of our own experience and savour the contrast between them. If it is as James says "a terrible crime" to expose the fictional illusion, then Thackeray is the most offending soul alive; and indeed his obvious offence against the laws of Jamesian criticism is one major reason for the limited critical recognition which he receives today.

There is no need to apologize for Thackeray for his failure to conform to Jamesian principles. The consistency of "point of view" was not in his age the criterion of virtue in a novel that it has since become, nor was authorial intrusion as such considered a crime. Thackeray's technique of presentation in such novels as Vanity Fair and The Newcomes, with its wide-ranging vision and frequent 'distracting' comments, has its own virtues which tend to be overlooked by post-Jamesian critics.

In the first place it must be asserted that Thackeray's powers of creating a dramatic scene are very considerable - in spite of Friedman's assertion of the 'tendency in Editorial Omniscience away from scene,'²¹ or Mendilow's that "the dramatic method is entirely incompatible with the intrusive author."²² It is unnecessary to exemplify

here. Almost every chapter of Thackeray's novels shows his ability to zero in from a panoramic vision to the vivid close-up scene that gives us setting, situation, and character confrontation with powerful immediacy. The illusion lives, in spite of the author's occasional detached scrutiny of it qua illusion.

But this scrutiny, consisting in the various ways by which the writer reminds us in the course of the novel that he is writing a fiction, need not be an impediment to our apprehension of the illusion. There may be an added pleasure in the recurring consciousness of the discrepancy between illusion and reality. Paradoxically, it becomes easier to imagine meeting Major Pendennis or Amelia outside the pages of their novels than it is to envisage such an encounter with Strether or Maggie Verver. For the relation of the "panoramic" novel to life is different from that of the "dramatic" novel, but no less valid. The dramatic novel constitutes an experience in itself; but Thackeray intended his novels, typically written over a period of many months, to become a part of the fabric of his reader's total experience. The reader lives not so much through his characters, as he lives through the consciousness of the central figure in a James novel, but with them; and their lives, and the reader's, and the writer's, in some measure unfold together. Thackeray did not attempt to maintain a dramatic intensity uninterrupted through twenty-four numbers. Rather he tried to provide a means of easy transition between illusion and reality, whereby his reader could readily relate himself to either plane, and so penetrate some of the barriers between them. So in Vanity Fair he speaks directly to the reader:

As we bring our characters forward, I will ask leave, as a man and a brother, not only to introduce them, but occasionally to step down from the platform, and talk about them: if they are good and kindly, to love them and shake them by the hand; if they are silly, to laugh at them confidentially in the reader's sleeve: if they are wicked and heartless, to abuse them in the strongest terms which politeness admits of. (VF, 96)

Writer, reader and characters momentarily inhabit the same world.

Some of this particular kind of intimacy which he achieves we have lost with the passage of time and through reading each novel as a whole rather than as monthly units; though there are still people who make a practice of reading Vanity Fair every year, in the way they might make the same trip, in order to meet the people they know.²³ The Times review of The Newcomes testifies to the success and substantiality of Thackeray's kind of evocation:

Of course we all know the Newcomes. We may not visit at Park Lane or at Bryanstone or Fitzroy squares,... but they are people with whose habits and motives we are familiar - about whom we have talked pleasantly for months - who have been more, perhaps, to each of us than many families of his or her acquaintance. If we question our respective impressions, we may even find that to many intents we have looked upon these "Newcomes" as real personages, as helping to people our world.²⁴

And this is said of beings who had just been represented as 'fading away into fable-land' (Nc, 1007). The illusion which Thackeray created is strong enough to survive such an exposure: and it is strong partly because of the exposure.

Thackeray is liable to attack from Jamesian criticism not only for such commentary as jeopardizes the fictional illusion, but for all his commentary, most particularly his moralizing. This is said to constitute an insult to the reader's intelligence, in that he is being told what to think about the action rather than being shown the action and left to think for himself. Thackeray is the more severely criticized on this count because his comment is not only moral, like George

Eliot's, but it is said to be stupid as well. Dorothy Van Ghent calls his comments 'inane and distracting ... turning our attention on the momentarily flaccid mentality of the author,' and she is exasperated at the 'unforgivable parenthesis' about the writer's eagerness to kiss "such a dear creature as Amelia."²⁵ Arnold Kettle talks about the discrepancy between the vivid dramatization of Becky and the writer's comments on her: "Thackeray, the Victorian gentleman, may tone down her rebellion by ambiguous adverbs and a scandalized titter, but the energy he has put into her is far more profound than his morals or his philosophy and she sweeps him along."²⁶ This even manages to suggest that the commentary is all that Thackeray can be given credit for, and that Becky somehow created herself.

But it is mistaken to take the comments and moral judgements as the author's ex cathedra pronouncements. It is not "Thackeray himself" who wants to kiss Amelia, any more than it is Thackeray himself who suddenly appears with wife and children, speaking in the first person, at the end of the chapter discussing the general adulation of Miss Crawley and her bank balance in *Vanity Fair*:

Ah, gracious powers! I wish you would send me an old aunt - a maiden aunt - an aunt with a lozenge on her carriage ... how my children should work work-bags for her, and my Julia and I would make her comfortable! Sweet, sweet vision! Foolish, foolish dream! (VF, 104)

Thackeray in fact can be defended on Jamesian premises, in that his comments are dramatic, the product of an intelligence as limited as his characters' or his reader's. The identity of his commentator may vary: he may be the sentimental gentleman who wants to kiss Amelia, or the avid member of *Vanity Fair* who prays for a rich aunt; the lugubrious mourner at Rosey Newcome's funeral, who dwells on the fate of the

"poor little harmless lady" (Nc, 1003), or the brisk mourner at Lady Kew's, for whom "business is business, and must be attended to, though grief be ever so severe" (Nc, 726).²⁷ The comment may be more or less distant from Thackeray's own opinions: frequently it represents the thought of one of the characters in the book; often it is the voice of one or other of Thackeray's alter egos or a detached choral interpolation; sometimes it is intended to voice a possible reaction of the reader. But even where it appears to be closest to what we may think are Thackeray's own opinions, we should beware of accepting it as his unqualified judgement. More often it represents only a mood of the moment that is likely to be refuted by the next comment, written in a different mood.

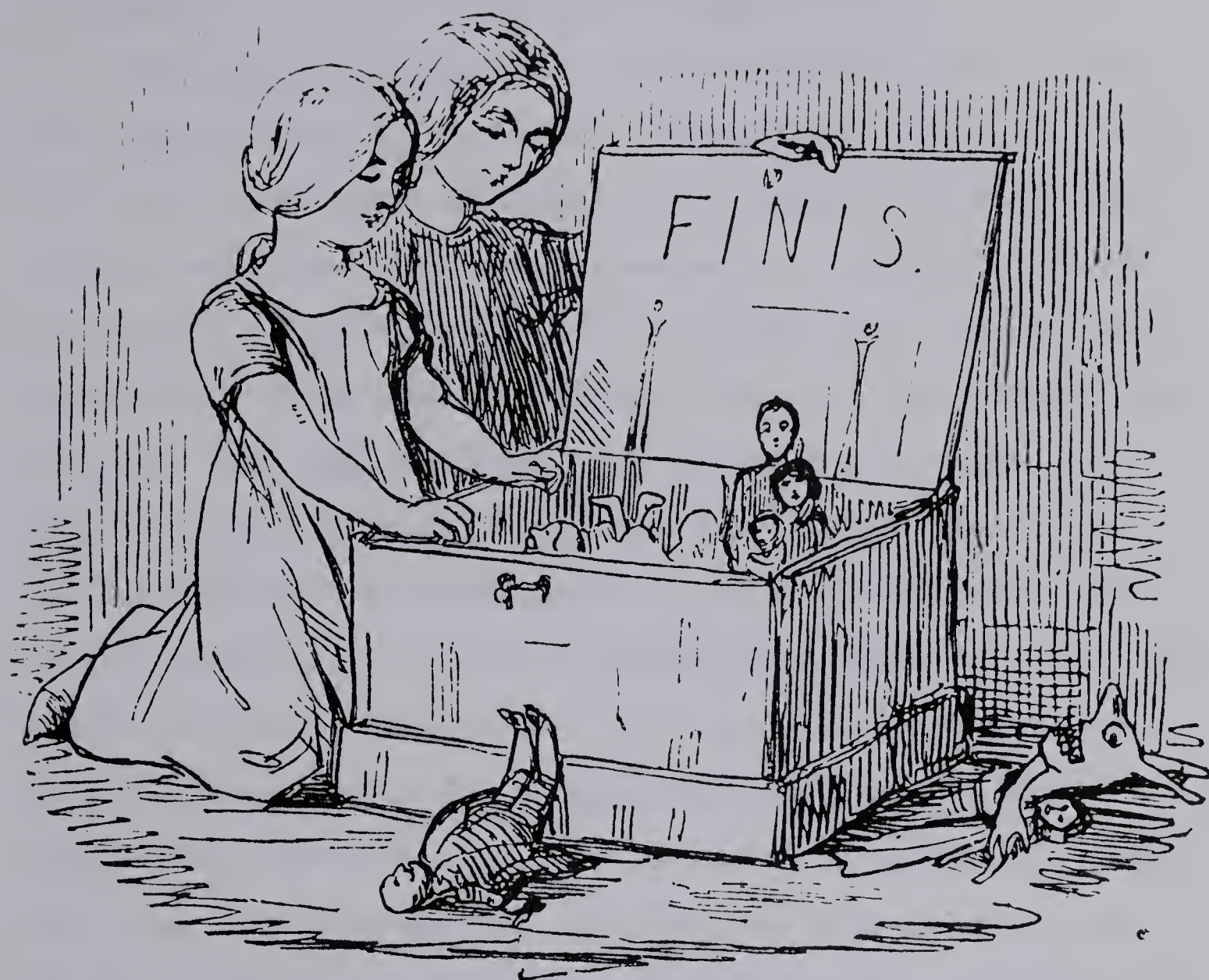
To separate the "flaccid" mentality of the narrator from the vivid incarnations which the dramatized scene presents, and to call the former "Thackeray" is to do him an injustice. What Thackeray provides us with is the total vision: the dramatized scenes and characters, and a whole range of possible reactions to them. Ford Madox Ford accused Thackeray of 'intruding his broken nose and myopic spectacles' into his novels;²⁸ but rather he presents us not just with his own but with many different pairs of spectacles, through which we may view the action from as many points of view.

Percy Lubbock, in drawing a distinction between the dramatic method of presenting Beatrix, and the less defined method of presenting Becky, makes a value judgement in favour of the former. "Can you remember any moment in Vanity Fair when you beheld Becky as again and again you behold Beatrix, catching the very slant of the light on her face? Becky never suddenly flowered out against her background in that way: some want of solidity and of objectivity there still is in Becky, and there must be,

because she is regarded from anywhere, from nowhere, from somewhere in the surrounding void."²⁹ But more specifically, she is regarded from all around, from varying viewpoints which see her successively as an indomitable and resourceful "heroine" (369), as "poor little Becky" (618), and as the siren with a "monster's hideous tail" (812). And as a matter of fact she does 'flower out against her background' constantly - against different backgrounds; so that we see her standing out as startlingly distinct among the bourgeois bureaucrats of the Sedley household, as well as among the patronizing aristocrats of Gaunt House, though these worlds are poles apart. A character with Beatrix's integrity shows enough of herself to one such observer as Henry Esmond to be interesting from his point of view alone; but Becky, who is a different person to every acquaintance and in each situation, gains solidity only through the shifting viewpoint of the ironist who can illuminate every facet. The quality of the portrait is different, certainly, from that of Beatrix's, but it is no less successful in its way, and it has its own three-dimensional reality.

The Protean nature of the authorial presence, and the various relations in which he stands to his characters, requires some demonstration.³⁰ Thackeray is so often characterized as the type of the "omniscient author," as the "manipulator of puppets" and so on, that it is worth noticing to what extent such labels must be qualified.

To speak of him as "omniscient" - as he calls himself often enough - is an over-simplification. He may tell us more of his characters' motives and feelings than James, who though he shows us much, actually tells us so little that to read his books becomes an exercise in psychological detective work; but Thackeray tells us far less of them than, say, George Eliot, who does aim at complete analysis. Though he constantly talks of



"Come, children, let us shut up the box and the puppets,
for our play is played out" (Vanity Fair, 878).

himself as "the novelist, who knows everything," he is not embarrassed by a sense of inconsistency in declaring, when pressed for an answer, that he really does not know, for instance, if Becky was actually guilty of adultery, or Pen of kissing Fanny in Vauxhall gardens.

The locus classicus for a consideration of the author as omniscient and omnipotent is the preface to Vanity Fair, "Before the Curtain." It is here that he speaks of himself as the creator of a set of puppets: the Becky Puppet which "has been pronounced to be uncommonly flexible in the joints, and lively on the wire," the Amelia Doll, and the Dobbin Figure, which "though apparently clumsy, dances in a very natural manner," and so on. The image is that of a god who can with the twitch of a string manipulate or eliminate his creatures. The omnipotent author can mete out rewards and punishments, so that at the end of the book the illustration shows a box of unanimated dolls, Dobbin and Amelia still standing, but Jos on his back with his jointed knees bending backwards, and Becky, short of stuffing, squashed under the box in the arms of a puppet-fiend. The author often tells us that he is at liberty to juggle as he likes with his characters. For instance, he reassures us about the fate of Harry Warrington in The Virginians when he is knocked unconscious by telling us that he has no intention of squandering his hero so early in the book (212), and confesses it was a matter of expediency that he eliminated Lady Kew when he did in The Newcomes (1009). His characters are thus submitted to a sort of artistic irony of fate within the pages of the novel: they are subject to their author's caprice as Euripides' characters are subject to that of the jealous gods.³¹

Yet even within the two pages of "Before the Curtain" there is more than one kind of authorial presence suggested. The creator and manipulator

of the puppets also refers to himself as the Manager of the Performance; this begins to suggest that the characters are actors who, if they are performing under his direction, have at least some existence of their own that is beyond his control. This guise of the author is again a recurrent one in the novels, and he speaks in The Virginians of "stepping down from the stage where our figures are performing, attired in the habits and using the parlance of past ages" (Vns, 636). But as he watches his puppets perform, not only do they grow into actors on a stage, but, by a dreamlike metamorphosis, he himself becomes one of them: "There are bullies pushing about, bucks ogling the women, knaves picking pockets, policemen on the look-out, quacks (other quacks, plague take them!) bawling in front of their booths" (VF, 1). He enlarges on this image of himself as the quack among other quacks in Vanity Fair with reference to his cover design of a man in a fool's cap and bells, preaching to a congregation similarly attired:

The moralist, who is holding forth on the cover (an accurate portrait of your humble servant), professes to wear neither gown nor bands, but only the very same long-eared livery in which his congregation is arrayed. (VF, 95)

Gulliver is no longer among the Lilliputians; in fact the godlike status of the author is to be further diminished, and his whole authority called in question, when it is casually revealed that the whole history of Becky was merely a dinner-time relation by one Tapeworm, "who of course knew all the London gossip;" that Vanity Fair, far from being the ex cathedra pronouncement of an Olympian being whose authority is final, could well be nothing more than a proliferation of scandal (VF, 849).

There are plenty of occasions on which he speaks of his characters as acting quite beyond his control; he is not responsible for the marriage

of Esmond and Rachel, for they "married themselves;" he complained that he was losing sleep, during the course of writing The Newcomes, because Colonel Newcome was so perversely "making a fool of himself." "The characters once created lead me, and I follow where they direct," he admitted (Letters, III, 438n). He speaks of Philip Firmin as being "so rude and overbearing that I really have a mind to depose him from his place of hero - only, you see, we are committed. His name is on the page overhead, and we can't take it down and put up another" (Ph, 144). This suggests simultaneously the Olympian novelist who would juggle with his characters but for the exigencies of typography, and the mere chronicler who has no control over the unruly behaviour of the man who is his subject. It sometimes becomes doubtful, in fact, whether the puppeteer is manipulating the dolls, or the dolls the puppeteer.

In Pendennis, where there is no explicit limitation of the narrator's viewpoint as there is in Barry Lyndon, Henry Esmond, and in The Newcomes and Philip, the author again admits the limitations of his information: we can never know the contents of Costigan's letter of challenge to Major Pendennis, because it was never delivered. And again, the ultimate sanction of the whole history is ironically put in doubt by a sudden revelation that "all this narrative is taken from Pen's own confessions, so that the reader may be assured of the truth of every word of it" (Pnd, 234).

At the end of The Newcomes we are again in the presence of an author who professes to be both the master and the servant of his creatures, who are both dolls and autonomous beings:

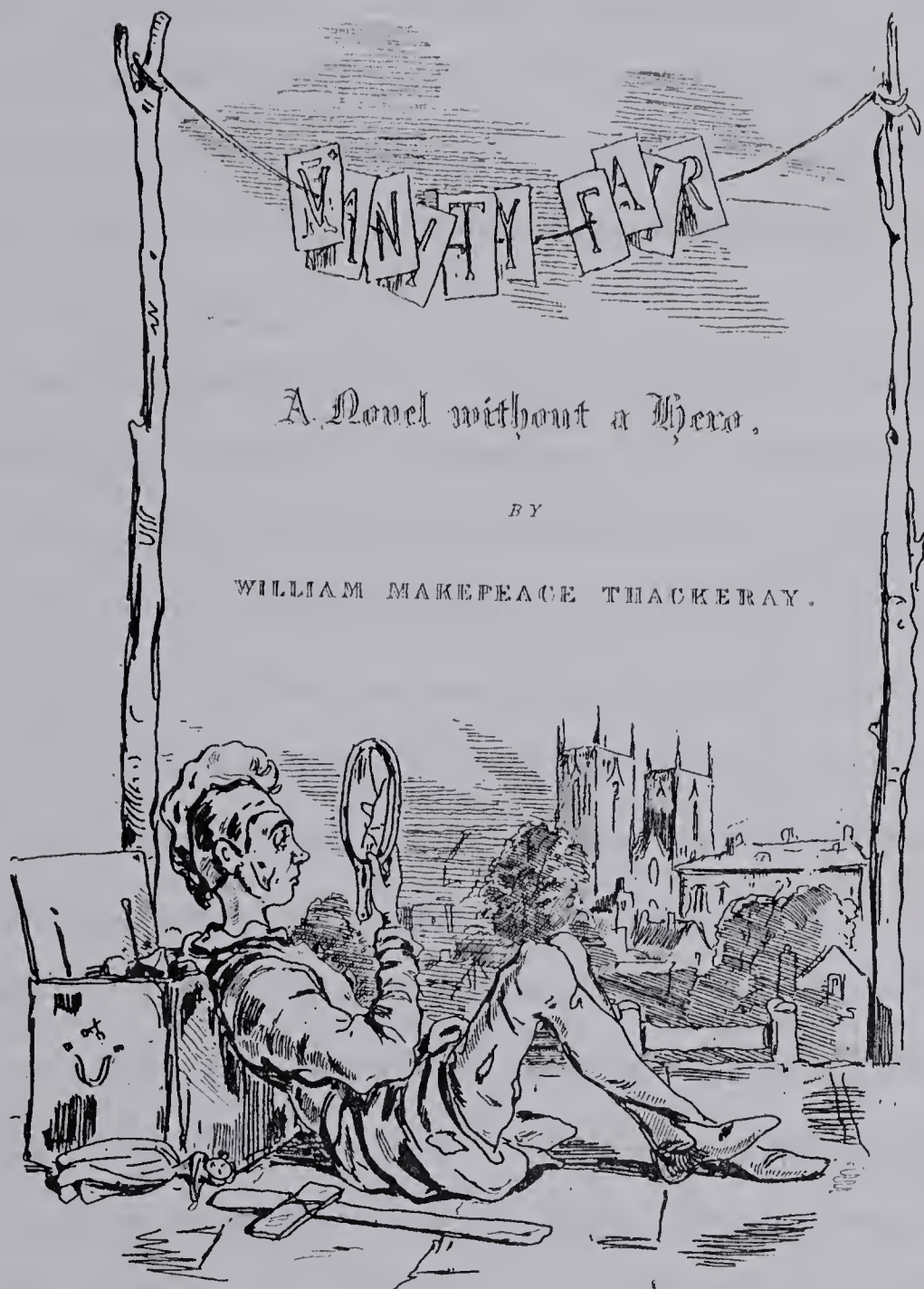
As I write the last line with rather a sad heart, Pendennis and Laura, Ethel and Clive fade away into fable-land. I hardly know whether they are not true: whether they do not live near us somewhere. They were alive, and I heard their voices; but five minutes since was touched by their grief. And have we parted with them here on a sudden, and without so much as a shake of the hand? (Nc, 1007)

From the point of view of the Jamesian critic, it may be an artistic crime to shatter the illusion that has been laboriously constructed through two years and a thousand pages. Nevertheless, it is a great moment: Cleopatra's evocation of the players who are to stage her love - "I shall see/Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness" - has something in common with it in its sudden turning of the spotlight on the source of the illusion; so too, in its use of the suddenly diminishing perspective, has Keats's ending for "The Eve of St. Agnes," a poem which up to the last stanza maintains an atmosphere of almost tactual immediacy:

And they are gone: aye, ages long ago
These lovers fled away into the storm.

Illusion and reality are momentarily illuminated in the same instant; and if this is done successfully, the one can enhance, rather than dispel, the other.

The author appears in his work in many different relations to it. Sometimes he is outside the action, often enough he locates himself among his characters, sometimes as commentator, but often as participant. In The Newcomes, for instance, it is difficult to draw consistent distinctions between the statements of the historical Thackeray (he does give us some straight biographical statements), the implied author, Pendennis the narrator, and Clive the protagonist. Even minor characters like Warrington, Colonel Newcome and Laura have recognizable traits of the pervading authorial personality: all these are to some extent Thackeray, for as he said in his letters, "writing novels ... is thinking about yourself" (III, 645); but each has a separate (if not always separable) artistic existence of his own, and each belongs to his own



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"That maybe cracked and warped looking glass in which I am always looking" (Letters, II, 423). Title page to the first edition of Vanity Fair.

level in a sort of artistic chain of being. Pendennis, for instance, is supposedly a chronicler of Clive's history, and he works with letters and other documents, and with his personal knowledge of his friend. But he is also allowed to suppose and to relate more than he can document, and more than Clive could have told him, and at moments he is indistinguishable from the implied author himself. Nevertheless, he is swept away with Clive and all the others at the end, and we are left with the author as the superior being. The authorial presence is pervasive, but it is elusive.

One of the most noticeable traits of the authorial personality in the novels, whether he enters as an Olympian or as a character dramatically conceived, is his faculty for self-mockery. He wears "the very same long-eared livery" as his congregation. Swift called Satire "a sort of Glass, wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own;"³² and presumably he conceives the satirist as holding the glass up for others to look in. Thackeray, on the other hand, always sees his own face reflected in the mirror which he holds up to nature: "Good God dont I see (in that may-be cracked and warped looking glass in which I am always looking) my own weaknesses wickednesses lusts follies shortcomings?" (Letters, II, 423). He writes "The Book of Snobs, by one of Themselves;" he speaks of "quacks (other quacks, plague take them!)" and is more ready to acknowledge his affinity with the worldliness of Pendennis than the morality of Warrington. His letters are full of the same kind of ironic self-examination: "The Boston papers... said I was a humbug (which entre nous may possibly be a not incorrect opinion)" (III, 179). Chesterton saw in this quality of Thackeray's his major contribution to Victorian morality:

The one supreme and even sacred quality in Thackeray's work is that he felt the weakness of all flesh. Whenever he sneers it is at his own potential self.... He stood for the remains of Christian humility, as Dickens stood for the remains of Christian charity. Dickens, or Douglas Jerrold, or many others might have planned a Book of Snobs; it was Thackeray, and Thackeray alone, who wrote the great sub-title, "By One of Themselves."³³

He is always ready in his satire to turn his indignation against himself. In any passage of obviously partisan writing, for instance, we can expect that the harangue will end with an ironic twist. So when Mr. Batchelor, one of Thackeray's obvious alter egos, rails against a mother-in-law, although we know that Thackeray had plenty of reason to agree with him, and was no doubt intentionally aiming a blow at Mrs. Shawe, the weapon turns out to be double-edged:

I wish with all my heart I was about to narrate a story with a good mother-in-law for a character; but then you know, my dear madam, all good women in novels are insipid. This woman certainly was not. She was not only not insipid, but exceedingly bad tasted. She had a foul, loud tongue, a stupid head, a bad temper, an immense pride and arrogance, an extravagant son, and very little money.... No, madam, it was your turn to bully me once - now it is mine, and I use it.... Here you shall be shown up. And so I intend to show up other women and other men ~~men~~ who have offended me. Is one to be subject to slights and scorn, and not have revenge? Kindnesses are easily forgotten; but injuries! - what worthy man does not keep those in mind? (Lov, 60)

Batchelor's abuse of Lady Baker is not cancelled by the exposure of his rather spitefully vengeful motivation; but by a technique of ironic double exposure, the two images superimposed give an impression of a three-dimensional reality.

Mr. Batchelor is interesting for another trait than his facility for ironic self-exposure. He is the fullest realization of one recurrent type among Thackeray's various masks, the outsider. Thackeray's favorite alter ego, Michael Angelo Titmarsh, is always the observer rather than the participator, as are Mr. Spec (the literary descendant of

Mr. Spectator), Dr. Solomon Pacifico, and Edward Fitz-Boodle (whose adventures consist in not marrying various women).³⁴ But Titmarsh is not so content in his role as Mr. Spectator - he is always looking into the world of action and thinking about participating, yet at the same time clinging desperately to his position beyond the pale when it seems that he will get drawn into the world which he observes. He half-heartedly dallies with the notion that he is in love, but is evidently relieved, after the lady has accepted a more impetuous wooer, to be able to nurse a broken heart and retire to his position of wistful detachment: "Need I repeat that in the course of my blighted being, I never loved a young gazelle to glad me with its dark blue eye, but when it came to, &c., the usual disappointment was sure to ensue?" (X, 290). Titmarsh, through his relation to Lady Kicklebury, becomes Touchit in the play The Wolves and the Lamb, and finally evolves as Mr. Batchelor in the adaptation of the play as a novel in Lovel the Widower. "Who shall be the hero of this tale?" he begins. "Not I who write it. I am but the Chorus of the Play" (Lov, 57). And yet he is obviously the centre of attention, if not the hero, for there is little attempt to make Lovel interesting. The dramatic core of the book is not where it is decided Lovel will marry Bessy Prior, but where it is decided that Batchelor will not. The situation arises when Bessy is being accosted by the seedy libertine, Baker, and Batchelor overhears the scene from the garden:

I was just going to run in, - and I didn't. I was just going to rush to Bessy's side and clasp her (I have no doubt) to my heart: to beard the whiskered champion who was before her, and perhaps say, 'Cheer thee - cheer thee, my persecuted maiden, my beauteous love - my Rebecca. Come on, Sir Brian de Bois Guilbert, thou dastard Templar. It is I, Sir Wilfred of Ivanhoe.'... And I give you my honour, just as I was crying my war-cry, couching my lance, and rushing à la recousse upon

Sir Baker, a sudden thought made me drop my (figurative) point: a sudden idea made me rein in my galloping (metaphorical) steed, and spare Baker for that time. (Lov, 152)

His native hue of resolution is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought; like Hamlet, or like Conrad's Jim, he is unable to act at the crucial moment. He ends by seeing Lovel carry off the girl, and is not without some relief at his deliverance: "Suppose I had gone in? But for that sudden precaution, there might have been a Mrs. Batchelor. I might have been a bullied father of ten children. (Elizabeth has a fine high temper of her own)" (Lov, 152).

This figure is recurrent as an alter ego for Thackeray. He is always watching the girl he loves wooed and won by someone else; and often even promoting the match. Dobbin worships Amelia, but pushes George Osborne into marrying her. There is some probing into his motivation to show that it is not just altruism that makes him hasten the match: his misery is to a large extent deliberately self-inflicted: It was his counsel had brought about this marriage, and all that was to ensue from it. And why was it? Because he loved her so much that he could not bear to see her unhappy: or because his own sufferings of suspense were so unendurable that he was glad to crush them at once. (VF, 278)

Even after George's death, it is ironic that Dobbin should continue to disqualify himself as a lover by contributing to Amelia's conception of George as a saint to whom a life of widowhood must be devoted.

As Dobbin is the outsider, the detached and socially clumsy side of Thackeray, George Osborne, the unworthy winner of the prize, is another side of him, the side that was accused of being a snob. There is the same relationship between Warrington and Pendennis, though Pen is more sympathetically portrayed than George Osborne. Warrington falls in love with Laura, and is morally worthy of her; but he, like Thackeray,

had made an unsuccessful early marriage, which has put him out of the race.

'You are on the bank, old boy, content to watch the waves tossing in the winds, and the struggles of others at sea,' Pen said. 'I am in the stream now, and by Jove I like it.... Eh, vogue la galère, I say. It's good sport, Warrington - not winning merely, but playing.'

'Well, go in and win, young 'un. I'll sit and mark the game,' Warrington said, surveying the ardent young fellow with an almost fatherly pleasure.... 'As for me, I am disabled. I had a fatal hit in early life.' (Pnd, 571)

Warrington too promotes the marriage of the girl he loves to someone else. So, with Thackeray, Titmarsh, Dobbin, Warrington and Batchelor become the voyeur, watching the love of Amelia, Laura, Bessy or, if it comes to that, Jane Brookfield,³⁵ for some unworthy hero. Esmond and Clive Newcome to some extent belong in the same category. James's non-participating heroes, best instanced by Strether in The Ambassadors, are comparable characters.³⁶ The wistfully self-abnegating attitude of this figure, who is never sure whether the grapes beyond his reach are sweet or sour, nor even if they are in fact beyond his reach, is rich in ironic potential.

Warrington's "fatherly" attitude is typical of another noticeable trait of Thackeray's narrators - their age. To Thackeray himself the pose of the old fogey was a natural attitude. His personal situation, that of being married to a wife who was in an insane asylum, cut him off from many of the normal relationships of life, and forced on him the role of non-participator, a role which he projected on his narrators; and it also made him feel old in experience. He was used to thinking of himself, and being taken to be, older than his years. He talks of himself as "a grave old gentleman," and wrote in 1854, "Now I am near 43 no Grandfather can be more glum" (Letters III, 359). Trollope said of

him in 1859:

He was then forty-eight years old, very gray, with much of age upon him, which had come from suffering - old age shown by dislike of activity and by an old man's way of thinking about many things - speaking as though the world were all behind him instead of all before.³⁷

He considered himself beyond the passions and aspirations of youth:

"At 47," he wrote to a friend, "Venus may rise from the sea, and I for one should hardly put on my spectacles to have a look" (Letters IV, 115).

This attitude, which pervades his letters, is communicated to his narrators and alter egos. At the age of thirty-nine, with only Vanity Fair of his major novels completed, he was already writing in the person of Dr. Solomon Pacifico on the "Pleasures of being a Fogey," and discussing the advantages, from the point of view of mental tranquillity, of reminiscence over experience. Many of his central male characters, and some of the female (the worldly ones, Blanche and Beatrix), feel old before their time. Dobbin on returning from India "had passed into the stage of old-fellow-hood. His hair was grizzled, and many a passion and feeling of his youth had grown grey in that interval" (VF, 737). Pendennis is made prematurely old and cynical by his commerce with the world, Esmond feels himself to be a hundred years old, and is called "Graveairs;" and George Warrington, who takes over the narration in The Virginians, describes himself as a middle-aged gentleman, and is no more moved by the vision of sirens than Thackeray by Venus anadyomene (Vns, 185). Pendennis as the narrator in The Newcomes and Philip is another middle-aged gentleman who is considering events which happened in his youth: "This narrative, as the judicious reader no doubt is aware, is written maturely and at ease, long after

the voyage is over, whereof it recounts the adventures and perils" (Nc, 296).

This is typical of the temporal relation in which the narrator stands to the events he relates in Thackeray's novels. Denis Duval, for instance, is written some fifty years after the incidents chronicled in the first chapters, and Denis describes himself sitting in his arm-chair surveying in memory the stormy past, and "scared and astonished sometimes: as huntsmen look at the gaps and ditches over which they have leapt, and wonder how they are alive" (XVII, 256). The double vision that includes past and present involves an ironic comparison between them. So Barry Lyndon, in describing the splendours of Castle Lyndon as he first saw it, recalls simultaneously what each item fetched when he subsequently had to sell it (BL, 236).

The action is past, the whole course of events is spread out in memory and available for the narrator to consider at leisure, and to ponder over with an air of omniscience. He can manipulate chronology, for instance, in order to show, for his own purposes, the effect before the cause. Much of Thackeray's air of 'omniscience' is in fact merely wisdom after the event.

Thackeray comments on his own preference for the nostalgic, reminiscential vision in a Roundabout Paper, in a passage which recalls Denis's image of the huntsman looking back at the perilous ditches he has jumped:

The good-natured reader who has perused some of these rambling papers has long since seen (if to see has been worth the trouble) that the writer belongs to the old-fashioned classes of this world, loves to remember very much more than to prophesy, and though he can't help being carried onward, and downward, perhaps, on the hill of life, the swift milestones marking their forties, fifties - how many tens or

infatuation" (Pnd, 78). The whole progress of the relationship is informed by this contrast. Pen in his love sees himself as Byronic; he writes copious poetry in the middle of the night, he gallops round the country on his mare Rebecca, he fights for his love in a graveyard, he is in fact the romantic lover, "sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad/Made to his mistress' eyebrow." Emily, whom he sees as a romantic heroine, is by contrast entirely down-to-earth and prosaic: after her theatrical fervours she consumes mutton chop and brown stout; she is puzzled or bored by Pen's literary allusions; and she has an eye to financial advantage. When she comes to return his poems and letters, she ties up his effusions "with a piece of string neatly, as she would a parcel of sugar."

It is the detached and experienced narrator who can make the most of the humour of the situation, and occasionally he will cut off a character's raptures with a comment which defines his viewpoint: "Of course here Mr. Pen went off into a rhapsody which, as we have perfect command over our own feelings, we have no right to hear" (Pnd, 78). Major Pendennis shares this function with the author. His management of the situation is masterly, and can be summed up by a scrap of dialogue:

'I will see her,' said Arthur. 'I'll ask her to marry me, once more. I will. No one shall prevent me.'

'What, a woman who spells affection with one f? Nonsense, sir.'
(Pnd, 151)

But the major himself is a representative of another extreme, which is itself exposed.

The contrast operates not on the subject of love alone, though it is in Pen's love for the Fotheringay that it is best dramatized. Pen's

literary attitude, which begins with idealism and exaggerated notions about the afflatus of genius, is also subject to adjustment through exposure to the literary cynicism of Shandon. And when he comes to revise for publication the novel which he wrote in the fervour of involvement, he recalls for us Yeats's image of the scholars:

Tears fell upon the leaf of the book, perhaps, or blistered the pages of his manuscript as the passionate young man dashed his thoughts down. If he took up the books afterwards he had no ability or wish to sprinkle the leaves with that early dew of former times: his pencil was no longer eager to score its marks of approval.... How pompous some of the grand passages appeared!... And what meant those blots on the page? As you come in the desert to a ground where camels' hoofs are marked in the clay, and traces of withered herbage are yet visible, you know that water was there once; so the place in Pen's mind was no longer green, and the fons lacrymarum was dried up. (Pnd, 518)

In the conflict between the starry-eyed and the worldly-wise, which is in operation to some extent in all his books, Thackeray maintains the tension rather than resolving it. He does not try to convince us that youth is foolish and age is wise, nor, like Yeats, that youth is the genuine experience while age is merely a second-hand business of editing and annotating. The balance is maintained, much as James maintains the balance between European and American values. "A man can be alive in 1860 and in 1830 at the same time, don't you see?" (XVII, 440) Thackeray explained it in a Roundabout paper. Or, as he puts it in The Virginians, when Harry Warrington has gone through the progress of a passion similar to Pen's, "I never know whether to pity or congratulate a man on coming to his senses" (Vns, 583).

It is the same with the old question of whether Thackeray was a sentimentalist or a cynic. He is neither, except in so far as he is both. "Under the mask satirical," he said of himself, "there walks about a sentimental gentleman who means not unkindly to any mortal



"Under the mask satirical there walks about a sentimental gentleman who means not unkindly to any mortal person" (Letters, II, 539). Thackeray's self-portrait, Vanity Fair, 104.

person" (Letters, II, 539). The image is repeated in his self-portrait in Vanity Fair which shows him in jester's garb, removing a mocking mask to reveal a worried face. But the form which his justification took - and he did see it as a justification, not just as a description - was a defensive one, designed to refute the Victorian charge of cynicism that was repeatedly levelled at him.³⁸ In fact he was just as capable of peeling off the "sentimental" face to reveal another mocking countenance beneath. So he was always mentioning (but never fulfilling) his intention to change the yellow covers of his part numbers for a "fresher tone":

When this book is concluded, I shall change the jaundiced livery which my books have worn since I began to lisp in numbers, have rose-coloured coats for them with cherubs on the cover, and all the characters within shall be perfect angels. Meanwhile... (Vns, 364)

In the twentieth century Thackeray needs to be defended from the charge of sentimentality rather than that of cynicism. But though both these attitudes are found in his works, both are extremes, of feeling or the lack of it unwarranted by the situation; and Thackeray's vision was too clear, and his ability to see all round a situation too keen, to make him wholly adopt either. Moreover his habit of understatement makes extremes uncharacteristic of him. He may have his momentary lapses in one direction or the other - he may dwell too lugubriously on the death of Helen Pendennis or show a failure of sympathy in the dissection of a snob. But the truth of the whole vision corrects the occasional blindness of the parts. He is ready to expose an Amelia or a Helen as well as a real cynic like Lord Steyne, and yet to acknowledge at the same time their virtues of love on the one hand and penetration on the other. And for the most part the extremes, when they occur, are

dramatically justified, in that they represent not Thackeray's own response, but that of some character or narrator.

Thackeray's artistic attitude is made up of contradictions. As an artist he is so self-conscious that he is constantly emphasizing the discrepancy between illusion and reality and presenting his fiction in relation to the one and the other. He can display his characters as puppets, and yet convey a vivid sense of their substantiality and autonomy. He assumes an air of god-like omniscience and then calls in question the whole authority of his narrative. As he enters his works in various guises as narrator, editor or participating character, he chooses the viewpoint that allows the reader a double vision, a contrast between satire and self-mockery, youth and age, participation and observation. He is a pervading presence in his novels, but with the elusive quality of the ironist he evades definition, and the various attitudes which he presents are complementary rather than complete. And his question, "What right have you, my good sir, to know what is really passing in my mind?" gives some idea of the ultimate unavailability of any explicit final pronouncements in Thackeray's novels. The truth that he gives us is only that which we must find for ourselves somewhere between the double exposures which the ironist has provided.

II

IRONY IN THE SOCIAL UNIVERSE

"First the World was made: then, as a matter of course, Snobs." The world that Thackeray is talking about is that spelt with a large W, as the society he describes is that spelt with a large S; it is the World that Wordsworth found to be too much with us, the fallen world. In it, being a snob is the human condition. Since the fall man has been struggling upwards in an attempt to reinstate himself; but he is not always climbing in the right direction; and moreover the climbing that he does entails trampling down others who are trying to climb too. This feverish activity in trying to advance oneself at the expense of others, and in a worthless cause, is the vision of Vanity Fair; it is the World of Becky Sharp, Major Pendennis, Beatrix Esmond and the Newcome family. This is the way to get on in it:

To push on in the crowd, every male or female struggler must use his shoulders. If a better place than yours presents itself just beyond your neighbour, elbow him and take it. Look how a steadily-purposed man or woman at Court, at a ball, or exhibition, or wherever there is competition and a squeeze, gets the best place; the nearest the sovereign, if bent on kissing the royal hand; the closest to the grand stand, if minded to go to Ascot; the best view and hearing of the Rev. Mr. Thumpington, when all the town is rushing to hear that exciting divine; the largest quantity of ice, champagne, and seltzer, cold paté, or his or her favourite flesh-pot, if gluttonously minded, at a supper whence hundreds of people come empty away. A woman of the world will marry her daughter and have done with her; get her carriage and be at home and asleep in bed; whilst a timid mamma has still her girl in the nursery, or is beseeching the servants in the cloak-room to look for her shawls, with which someone else has whisked away an hour ago. What a man has to do in society is assert himself. Is there a good place at table? Take it. At the Treasury or the Home Office? Ask for it. Do you want to go to a party to which you are not invited? Ask to be asked. Ask A., ask B., ask Mrs. C., ask everybody you know: you will be thought a bore; but you will have your way. What matters if you are considered obtrusive, provided that you obtrude? By pushing steadily, nine hundred and ninety-nine people in a thousand will yield to you. Only command persons, and you may be pretty sure that a good number will obey. How well your money will have been laid out, O gentle



"To push on in the crowd, every male or female struggler must use his shoulders" (The Newcomes, 95)

reader, who purchase this; and, taking the maxim to heart, follow it through life! You may be sure of success. If your neighbour's foot obstructs you, stamp on it; and do you suppose he won't take it away? (Nc, 95)

Doyle's allegorical initial letter for this passage shows a crowd of ass-eared fools (the same as those the Quack of Vanity Fair preached to and about) struggling up a tree for fruit and kicking and treading each other down in the process. It also shows one of them, who has evidently succeeded in reaching it, looking exceedingly sick.

The fruit for which they are struggling may be slightly different for each one; the passage describes them grabbing for social or professional status, for power, for money, for luxury; and their appetites varying from the refined to the gluttonous. The vision of Vanity Fair, - of "cheating, fighting, dancing, and fiddling," of "bullies pushing about, bucks ogling the women, knaves picking pockets, policemen on the lookout, quacks bawling," and so on - this vision is here narrowed in scope to a certain section of society, and as it becomes more specific it becomes more realistic. Here we are shown pretension in the aristocracy, in upper middle-class Society, in fashionable religion, and in the professions.

This was Thackeray's elected limitation, to the middle-class world which he knew. He can range above and below it, with some insight into the aristocracy, and with glimpses into "those mysterious haunts, which lie couched about our splendid houses like Lazarus at the threshold of Dives" (X, 108). But for the most part his lords are seen not so much in relation to each other as to the middle-class society which adulates them; and his lower orders are usually of the servant class. Most of Thackeray's characters can be imagined as conceivably living or visiting in the house of, say, Sir Brian Newcome, the banker of dubious family

origin, but who has money, and an earl's daughter for a wife; Lord Steyne would be bored, no doubt, and Captain Costigan, though he would feel quite at home, would be hustled out as soon as decently possible; but neither would be extravagantly out of place there. And there would be room somewhere below or above stairs for Morgan, Briggs, Horrocks, Mrs. Bonner and the rest. It would be difficult, by contrast, to conceive of any likely pretext that would summon all Dickens's characters into any single setting; though Dickens is capable of showing the symbolic connection between Miss Havisham and a convict, between Lady Dedlock and Jo the crossing-sweeper, between Sir John Chester and the brutal Hugh, the kind of belief that he requires is of a different order from that of Thackeray, who was content to show, in realistic terms, the world as he knew it - a world in which the upper classes had very little to do with the lower, however their position might depend on them. Thackeray's characters are all gentlemen, or think themselves gentlemen; failing that, they are gentlemen's gentlemen.

The middle-class world that Thackeray chose to write about is representative enough, we understand, of the rest of the world. He suggests the same struggles and status-seeking going on upwards in the higher levels of the aristocracy and downwards among the servants. So we are shown Hannah Hicks, a land-lady's maid-of-all-work, who herself has "a young lady from the workhouse, who called Hannah, 'Mrs. Hicks, mum,' and who bowed as much in awe before that domestic, as Hannah did before Miss Honeyman" (Nc, 120). And so ad infinitum.

Class and class gradations, of different kinds and at different levels - these were Thackeray's subject. He was preoccupied with them as he saw the world around him was preoccupied with them. "I have an

eye for a Snob," proudly asserted the writer of The Book of Snobs. In the world his novels present he gives a complete sweep of a broad level of society, and studies how the different sections and strata react on one another. The divisions are vertical as well as horizontal. The world of the army, the church, trade, and the country gentleman are all seen in relation to one another, as within each of these there is a system of subordination.

Relationships are constantly seen in terms of class gradations. Consider the complex pattern of love relations in Lovel the Widower. Here the heroine, a governess, is courted by a literary dilettante, by a withered sprig of the nobility, by a doctor, by the butler, and by her master the sugar merchant: the worlds of art, the aristocracy, the professions, domestic service and trade are at her feet. Within the domestic hierarchy itself, we have the maid in love with the butler who is in love with the governess who sets her cap at the master. And Lovel's mother and successive mothers-in-law represent between them the decayed aristocratic, the middle-class evangelical, and the shabby-genteel. And all this is not only relevant to the situation: to a large extent it is the situation.

Whole plots are based on the progress of the characters up and down the gradations of the social ladder. Becky's career is the obvious example: the main plot interest of Vanity Fair is in how the illegitimate daughter of a Bohemian painter rises to frequent the houses of the great. Becky climbs the ladder, misses a step, and only just manages to find a precarious hold many rungs down. Even Amelia's story, which is psychological rather than social, is tied closely to her position in the World; and in the structure of the novel, the parallels between the two heroines,

or anti-heroines, are seen in terms of their relation to their source of money.

Thackeray has been criticized for his obsession with class distinctions and social pretension. Bagehot spoke with some exasperation of his endless accumulation of "petty details to prove that tenth-rate people were ever striving to be ninth-rate people."¹ And G.M. Young's image of Thackeray is of a passenger in a railway carriage "whose joy is darkened by one anxiety - he is not quite sure if his ticket entitles him to travel first class."²

But if this preoccupation with class is a fault, it is one that belongs to the genre that Thackeray was working in, and it makes him central to the tradition of the novel. Lionel Trilling, in his essay on "Manners, Morals and the Novel," might be writing specifically on Thackeray's novels rather than about the whole stream of English fiction. Deriving the novel from its first great exemplar, Don Quixote, because "Cervantes sets for the novel the problem of appearance and reality," he goes on:

The poverty of the Don suggests that the novel is born with the appearance of money as a social element - money, the great solvent of the solid fabric of the old society, the great generator of illusion. Or, which is to say the same thing, the novel is born in response to snobbery Snobbery is pride in status without pride in function. And it is an uneasy pride of status. It always asks, "Do I belong - do I really belong?"

- or "Am I really entitled to a first class seat?" -

And does he belong? And if I am observed talking to him, will it make me seem to belong or not to belong?" It is the peculiar vice not of aristocratic societies which have their own appropriate vices, but of bourgeois and democratic societies. For us the legendary strongholds of snobbery are the Hollywood studios, where two thousand dollars a week dare not talk to three hundred dollars a week for fear of being taken for nothing more than fifteen hundred dollars a week. The dominant emotions of snobbery are uneasiness, self-consciousness, self-defensiveness, the sense that one is not quite real but can in some way acquire reality.³

No novelist makes a man's income seem more significant than Thackeray - the amount of it, the way he earns and spends it, and what his own circle in society think of the way he earns and spends it. Thackeray shows men adopting and wearing social personae, and expending all their energy on living up to them. They are always asserting themselves in terms of their status, as though, as Trilling suggests, their very existence depended on it, as though it were their existence. This elaborate confusion between status and function, appearance and essence, in men's social behaviour is Thackeray's subject. He depicts it all with a show of being an impartial chronicler, often with the explicit assumption that these things are as they must and should be. But his irony is constantly at work in implying the essential values that Society has forgotten, and exposing the sham that has somehow come to be accepted as the reality.

The social context which Thackeray provides for his characters, so far as they exist "wherever there is competition or a squeeze," is a complex and fully-realized one. At the apex there is still the aristocracy of hereditary rank, represented in his fiction by powerful figures like Lord Crabs, Lord Steyne, Lady Rockminster, Lady Kew, the Baroness Bernstein and Lord Ringwood. They are powerfully conceived, at least, and even pervasively influential in themselves - there is a touch of the devil, or the fairy, or the witch about many of them. But there is also the sense that their power has been curtailed. They are noticeably old, survivals from a world which does not quite exist any longer; and though they are usually sure-footed and resourceful, they are momentarily uncertain of themselves. Lady Kew does not ultimately succeed in ruling Ethel Newcome; Lord Ringwood at last fails to be as despotic as he means

to be. The younger generation usually inherit their weaknesses without their strengths. Young Lord Kew is the most sympathetic of them; but there is nothing particularly commanding about him; and he virtually abdicates from the aristocracy by adopting his mother's bourgeois evangelical morality. The sword of Damocles, or hereditary madness, overhangs the Gaunt family. Foolish young lisping lords like Cinquebars, who are completely despicable though universally fawned upon, recur in the novels as degenerate figures:

A sallow, blear-eyed, rickety, undersized creature, tottering upon a pair of high-heeled laquered boots, and supporting himself upon an immense gold-knobbed cane, entered the room with his hat on one side and a jaunty air.... The little man had no beard to his chin, appeared about twenty years of age, and might weigh, stick and all, some seven stone. (III, 364)

The same figure returns as the alcoholic Captain Baker of Lovel the Widower at the end of Thackeray's career; the type is perhaps best realized in Lord Farintosh, the nobleman whom Ethel almost marries in The Newcomes, and who is mentally if not physically deficient.

Below the aristocracy in the hierarchy of birth are the baronets, and the country gentry like the Crawleys. Often enough they are degenerate too, as witness Sir Francis Clavering and the elder Sir Pitt. But they are wily and adaptable as a class, and many of them are able to change from their eighteenth-century or Regency prodigality and independence of moral judgement to a kind of compromise with nineteenth-century evangelicalism. In other words, they become niggardly hypocrites, like Sir Pitt Crawley the younger, Sir Miles Warrington of The Virginians, or Sir John Ringwood of Philip. Such men are models for Hobson Newcome, the parvenu banker, in his endeavour to buy his way into country gentlemanhood.

Birth and money are a powerful combination, but where birth is lacking, money alone can be of considerable effect, and there is another whole system of gradations based on income. So we have the Sedley-Osborne history, and its effect on the union of the younger generations, Amelia and George. The old stockbroker Sedley, who had sponsored the new financier Osborne and stood godfather to his son, goes bankrupt on the return of Napoleon. Osborne turns against him, and years later moralizes on the difference between them to his grandson:

'You see what comes of merit and industry, and judicious speculations, and that. Look at me and my banker's account. Look at your poor grandfather Sedley, and his failure. And yet he was a better man than I was, this day twenty years - a better man I should say by ten thousand pound.' (VF, 773)

Of course it makes a difference, even within the business and trading classes, how you make your money. Dobbin, the grocer's son, in a school populated by the sons of wholesalers, is sneered at and called 'Figs' because his father is in the retail trade. Banking is perhaps as respectable a way of making money as any, and the Newcomes are a "most respectable family." But it is questionable whether making money as such is respectable at all. The doctrine that money is the greatest good is fervently practised in Society, but not preached. The banking Newcomes know enough to leave their business identities behind them in the City each night, and merely to enjoy the returns of their industry without mentioning them in their social gatherings. In boasting of his wealth old Osborne brands himself as nouveau riche, and his son, with the same instincts as the Newcomes, is disgusted at the social solecism:

'Curse the whole pack of money-grubbing vulgarians! I fall asleep at their stupid parties. I've been accustomed to live with gentlemen, and men of the world and fashion, Emmy, not with a parcel of turtle-fed tradesmen.' (VF, 246)

But George is of course ready enough to spend the money which he does not like to hear mentioned.

The relationship between the hereditary members of Society and those who try to buy themselves into it is an uneasy one, particularly in the generation of the elder Osborne. "I'm a plain British merchant, I am," he finds it necessary to assert, claiming a kind of superior reality for his status over that of the nobility:

'[I] could buy the beggarly hounds over and over. Lords, indeed!... Why, I'll lay my life I've got a better glass of wine, and pay a better figure for it, and can show a handsomer service of silver, and can lay a better dinner on my mahogany, than ever they see on theirs - the cringing, sneaking, stuck-up fools.' (VF, 538)

Nevertheless, he toadies shamelessly to the "honourables," and even takes a kind of satisfaction in being patronised by his own son and grandson. George Osborne is on easier terms with Society, and considers himself a gentleman. Society does not, however, grant him this status without qualification, and a penniless wastrel of a baronet's son like Rawdon Crawley still considers him an upstart.

"I've no pride about me, Pen," says Major Pendennis in confidence to his nephew, on the subject of marriage. "I like a man of birth, certainly, but dammy, I like a brewery which brings in a man fourteen thousand a year" (Pnd, 508). The mercenary motive is a favourite subject of Thackeray's, and it forms the main theme of The Newcomes. "A comfortable thing it is to think that birth can be bought for money," reflects the writer of The Book of Snobs, and goes on, with a momentary lowering of the ironic mask, "I like to see those two humbugs which, dividing, as they do, the social empire of this kingdom between them, hate each other naturally - making truce and uniting - for the sordid interests of either" (IX, 297). The blood-money marriages depicted

in the novels are far from idyllic. The amiable Lady Clavering, who pronounces Hackney "Ackney" but has many lakhs of rupees to her credit, lives a miserable life with an aristocratic wastrel of a husband who gambles away her fortune; Lady Anne Newcome, an earl's daughter who married a banker out of "duty" to her family, calmly disparages the ton of her brother-in-law, her son, and her husband when she is speaking to her daughter: "Que voulez-vous, my love? The Newcomes are honourable: the Newcomes are wealthy: but distinguished, no. I never deluded myself with that notion when I married your poor dear papa" (Nc, 203). The children of such marriages, we are told, are likely to be lacking in love for their parents. Nevertheless, there can be a certain vitality in them, as witness the lively Foker in Pendennis, whose maternal and paternal grandfathers were respectively an earl and a brewer.

Failing both birth and money, a man's chances of penetrating into Society are still not quite hopeless. In fact the man with a small income and the right kind of self-confidence and push can do better than someone like Osborne. Major Pendennis, a half-pay officer whose father was an apothecary, manages to move in the very best society on the strength of an annuity, his military campaigns in India, a talent for genealogy, and a good deal of tact and diplomacy. The Twysdens in Philip, by dint of turning dresses, hiring servants by the evening, starving themselves when there is no company, and swearing they pay a higher figure for their wine than they do, manage to preserve the illusion that their income is twice what it is, and to lure certain members of the nobility to attend their dinners at least once. These are the people who have learned the lesson of The Newcomes, that "to push on in the crowd, every male or female struggler must use

his shoulders."

Cutting across the strata in the hierarchies of birth and wealth are the categories of the professions. They have their own rivalries between one another, and their own pecking order: so "the doctor's wife is sulky because she has not been led out before the barrister's lady" (IX, 375), and the apothecary Clump profits in his profession by plying Dr. Squills with choice Madiera (VF, 233).

The military world, with its rigid system of subordination, is a favourite milieu for Thackeray, and many of his major characters either are or have been in the army. With his usual minuteness he shows how Rawdon Crawley remembers the name of George Osborne's regiment "with an effort, as became a guardsman" (VF, 169). In Philip he explores the situation where Mrs. Major MacWhirter has to give precedence to her younger sister, Mrs. General Baynes.

There is the same pretentiousness in the church as in the secular professions: parson and curate have the same relation as doctor and apothecary. Parsons, too, have to be on their promotion. Dr. Tusher, in Henry Esmond, knows on which side his bread is buttered and acts accordingly: "It being this man's business to flatter and make sermons, it must be owned he was most industrious in it, and was doing the one or the other all day" (HE, 90). His son Tom, following in his father's footsteps, finally gains his bishopric after a career comparable with the Vicar of Bray's. Charles Honeyman, the fashionable preacher who sells pews in Lady Wittlesea's Chapel as though they were theatre seats, has to compete against other fashionable preachers:

Honeyman has a right to speak of persecution, and to compare himself to a hermit in so far that he preaches in a desert. Once like another hermit, St. Hierome, he used to be visited by lions. None such come to

him now. Such lions as frequent the clergy are gone off to lick the feet of other ecclesiastics. (Nc, 320)

Another minister who has allowed worldly pursuits to mitigate spiritual ones, Parson Sampson, in a chapter headed "Sampson and the Philistines," is besieged in his very pulpit by Irish and Jewish bailiffs (Vns, 397).

The changing fashions from Low to High Church are part of the background of The Newcomes, where the self-righteous bluestocking Mrs. Hobson Newcome elects to be Low because the Brian Newcomes are High. The rivalry between denominations is also part of the social context: in Pendennis we are shown how Dr. Portman and Mr. Simcoe, of Church and Chapel respectively, vie with each other for the greatest share of the Chatteris population in their congregations. Among the minor characters of the novels there is a troop of ministers of various persuasions, whose names indicate the nature of their doctrines: "the Rev. Lawrence Grills, the Reverend Saunders McNitre, the Scotch divine; or the Reverend Luke Waters, the mild Wesleyan; or the Reverend Giles Jowls, the illuminated cobbler" (VF, 414), as well as the Reverend Samuel Whey, who is "full of the milk-and-water of human kindness."

Nor is there any great sanctity about the administrators of the realm: the political profession is another part of the world of pushing and squeezing. The two members for Queen's Crawley are elected by some seven voters; and even after this rotten borough is abolished with the Reform Bill, elections are far from equitable. Pen almost gains himself a seat in Parliament, but gives it up when he finds that blackmail is the means of getting it. Colonel Newcome is degraded by the election in which he is returned as a member for Newcome, and never takes up his seat. Warrington, one of his staunch supporters, has no

range of possibilities in a handshake itself, which may include how many of the fingers are offered, whether the hand is gloved or not, whether the gloves are new or merely cleaned, or even dirty. Lady Kew shows her estimation of Clive Newcome by offering him two fingers to shake; Sir Brian Newcome similarly condescends to Pendennis, who afterwards regrets that he had not the presence of mind "to poke one finger against his two" (Nc, 174). Becky is quick-witted enough to put the patronizing George Osborne in his place by extending him one finger when he magnanimously offers his hand (VF, 172). Perhaps the most elaborate image of the kind is in Pendennis:

The duke gave the elder Pendennis a finger of a pipe-clayed glove to shake, which the major embraced with great veneration; and all Pen's blood tingled, as he found himself in actual communication, as it were, with this famous man (for Pen had possession of the major's left arm, whilst that gentleman's other wing was engaged with his Grace's right). (Pnd, 461)

Clothes are another means of judging status in such a society: Carlyle chose an appropriate image for his age in Sartor Resartus. Thackeray used the same metaphor in Pendennis, where the hero is a dandy, and where Major Pendennis's wig and false teeth, and the recurring image of the false glitter and costumery of the theatre, are emblematic of society's pretentiousness and hypocrisy. Alternatively, people may be classified according to where they live: it would almost be possible to make a map of London from his novels that would be zoned according to the degree of gentility of certain streets and areas. Russell Square is genteel enough for the Sedley family in their days of prosperity; but it is anathema to Yellowplush, the footman in high society who considers himself at home in Piccadilly and Belgrave Square.

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He describes many people who buy their way into such publications. The Newcomes, refusing to take the hint that is contained in their name, buy themselves a genealogy, and are uncertain, when told with some éclat that they are descended from Edward the Confessor's barber-surgeon, whether to be proud of the antiquity of the family, or ashamed of its menial origin. Alfred Muggins, on the authority of Fluke's Peerage, appears as Sir Alured Mogyns Smythe de Mogyns, with further testimonies of his family's ancient standing: "Arms - a mullion garbled, gules on a saltire reversed of the second. Crest - a tom-tit rampant regardant. Motto - Ung Roy ung Mogyns" (IX, 291). An upstart Italian prince, whose grandfather made the family fortune by selling tobacco and red pocket-handkerchiefs, has as his coat of arms "a gold mushroom on a crimson field" (VF, 824).

Court titles, and the flunkeyism involved in disguising a menial duty as an honour, are another favourite butt for satire. Lord Steyne's formidable list of titles includes "First Lord of the Powder Closet and Groom of the Back Stairs." A character in Esmond is proud to be the eldest son of the Hereditary Grand Bootjack of the Empire, "and heir to that honour of which his ancestors had been very proud, having been kicked for twenty generations by one imperial foot, as they drew the boot from the other" (HE, 14). Titles, like most of the other rewards of Society, are to be had for money, if only one has enough. As the Stuarts were notoriously as prodigal of honours as they were grasping of money, the Esmond family was able to buy the rank of Marquis from James II for £15,000. The reductio ad absurdum of this system of subordination in Court is envisaged in The Book of Snobs:

The only Court Circular story which ever pleased me was that of the King of Spain, who in great part was roasted because there was not time for the Lord Chamberlain to desire the Grand Gold Stick to order the first page in

waiting to bid the chief of the flunkeys to request the Housemaid of Honour to bring up a pail of water to put His Majesty out. (IX, 281)

The joke about the king who is a martyr to etiquette has its point in a world where enormous importance is accorded to essentially unimportant matters. Part of Thackeray's great skill in depicting this world is his ability to evoke what one might call 'social emotion.' He can probe the sensitive spot in us that reacts minutely to the estimation of others. Many of his characters exist as sentient beings only in so far as their status in society is inflated or deflated. They can cringe and they can smirk, for their deepest emotions - embarrassment and smugness - are those that depend on their standing in the eyes of others. For this sort of emotion one can go through life without ever loving or hating, for it is felt in relation to acquaintances rather than friends or family. It is the same 'social emotion' that is expressed in "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock;" and unlike the elemental feelings of love and hatred, it is perhaps more pervasive in life than in literature. "I protest the great ills of life are nothing," reflects Pendennis in The Newcomes - "the loss of your fortune is a mere flea-bite; the loss of your wife - how many men have supported it and married comfortably afterwards?" (Nc, 529). And so, rather than the tragic agonies, Thackeray likes to show the nagging twinges of existence, the little humiliations which can become so excruciating in their constant recurrence. Such is the familiar discomfort of Mr. Batchelor when he is mistaken for the footman by the odious Baker:

'Sir!' says I, and 'sir' was all I could say. The fact is, I could have replied with something remarkably neat and cutting, which would have transfixed the languid little jackanapes who dared to mistake me for a footman; but, you see, I only thought of my repartee some eight hours afterwards when I was lying in bed, and I am sorry to own that a great number of my best bon mots have been made in that way. (Lov, 132)

The rigid system of class subordination which Thackeray sets up in his novels gives him a context for his constant use of ironic inversion in his social relationships. The more rigid the system, the more piquant is any reversal of the normal order.

He uses servants constantly for this purpose. Servants play an important though unobtrusive role in his novels. There is always a kitchen chorus that will be commenting on their masters' actions, or judging them, or mirroring, in their own activities below stairs, what is going on above. Their values are as distorted as those of Society, where appearance is taken for reality, status for essence, the clothes for the man. And here there is a further ambiguity in that their status depends not only on their place in the domestic hierarchy from butler to skivvy, but on their employers' standing in the great world as well.

"Morgan Pendennis" talks in his Gentlemen's Gentlemen's club as though he and his master were a composite being, and he uses the flunkey's - as opposed to the royal - "we." He defines his title to respect in terms of the numbers of aristocratic houses to which the major has an entrée:

'It ain't money, nor bein' a baronet, nor 'avin' a town and country 'ouse, nor a paltry five or six thousand a year ... that will give a pusson position in society, as you know very well. We've no money, but we go everywhere; there's not a housekeeper's room, sir, in this town of any consiquence, where James Morgan ain't welcome.' (Pnd, 780)

But servants in a bourgeois family are more inclined to be like Mr. Osborne, and assert their identity in terms of money. So Mrs. Blenkinsop, the Sedley's housekeeper, resents governesses because "they give themselves the hairs and hupstarts of ladies, and their wages is no better than you nor me" (VF, 75).

So the servants are a kind of pastoral parody of the ladies and gentlemen they serve. They are involved in intrigues which correspond with those of their employers: when Harry sighs for Lady Maria, Gumbo is at the feet of Betty; and when Lady Maria is arrested for debt, Betty's insolvency also comes to light. As the masters plan their mercenary matches, so Lightfoot marries the elderly Mrs. Bonner because she can set him up in a public house. And as Lord Farintosh, with nothing to recommend him but his money and his title, can always find flatterers, so there is a similar system of sycophancy among servants: the "little kitchenmaid on her promotion" applauds the cacophonous piano-playing of Horrocks, the butler's daughter who has become Sir Pitt Crawley's mistress, "Wagging her head up and down, and crying, 'Lor, mum, 'tis bittiful,' - just like a genteel sycophant in a real drawing-room" (VF, 505).

The observation that servants sit in judgement on their masters is almost a signature tune in Thackeray's novels.⁴ In Vanity Fair he speaks of "the awful kitchen inquisition that sits in judgement on us, and knows everything" (561); in The Newcomes of "this domestic criticism, from which not the most exalted can escape" (205); in Esmond of how "our lackeys sit in judgement on us" (135), and so on. The servants' grapevine is a highly developed means of communication from which "nothing is secret." And this inverted omniscience of the subordinate group that sees everything, but from the underside, confers an ironically god-like power, so that the masters may well find their servants play the part of nemesis:

You see a woman in a great party in a splendid saloon, surrounded by faithful admirers, distributing sparkling glances, dressed to perfection, curled, rouged, smiling and happy: - Discovery walks respectfully up to

her, in the shape of a huge powdered man with large calves and a tray of ices.... If you are guilty, tremble. That fellow behind your chair may be a janissary with a bow-string in his breeches pocket. If you are not guilty, have a care of appearances: which are as ruinous as guilt. (VF, 562)

But masters become subject to their servants in more than moral judgements; and some of Thackeray's most powerful scenes are those which show this reversal dramatically. Dorothy Van Ghent has pointed out the power of the image of Jos Sedley and Isidore: the fat English milor, who is in a panic lest his moustaches cause him to be taken for an English officer by a victorious Napoleonic army, subjects himself to the razor of his Flemish valet. There are many other images of the same kind. Nothing shows the completeness of Mr. Sedley's downfall more clearly than the encounter with his son-in-law's valet:

He took off his hat, however, with much condescension to Mr. Sedley, who asked news about his son-in-law, and about Jos's carriage, and whether his horses had been down to Brighton, and about that infernal traitor Bonaparty, and the war; until the Irish maid-servant came with a plate and a bottle of wine, from which the old gentleman insisted upon helping the valet. He gave him a half-guinea, too, which the servant pocketed with a mixture of wonder and contempt. (VF, 318)

Another great master-servant confrontation is that between Major Pendennis and Morgan. Morgan, by shrewd speculation, has become something of a capitalist, and actually owns the house in which his master rents lodgings. But he has still to put up with the major's arrogance:

The old gentleman's foot-bath was at the fire; his gown and slippers awaiting him there. Morgan knelt down to take his boots off with due subordination; and as the major abused him from above, kept up a growl of maledictions below at his feet. Thus, when Pendennis was crying, 'Confound you, sir, mind that strap - curse you, don't wrench my foot off,' Morgan sotto voce below was expressing a wish to strangle him, drown him, and punch his head off. (Pnd, 877)

This is a memorable tableau. Here are all the English lower classes kept in subjection by what is now little more than a habit, and beginning to know it. The tension is at breaking point; and Morgan does in fact

succeed in breaking the habit of a lifetime by denouncing the major outright. Major Pendennis is equal to the situation, and for this time maintains his dignity though he loses his valet. But the situation, with all its implications, is vividly dramatized. Thackeray has been accused of "a total absence in his books of what we usually call ideas,"⁵ and it is true that he never set forth anything like a social theory, and always avoided discussion of abstract concepts. There is no equivalent to Hard Times, Sybil, or Felix Holt among his novels. Nevertheless, he had an acutely developed social consciousness, and his ideas, if not formulated dialectically, are powerfully incarnated. The great lesson of the Victorian age, that "we must educate our masters," is embodied in his ironic reversals, and might have been learned from his as well as from the so-called "social" novels.

Ironic inversion in the social hierarchy is constantly used for humorous effect. So, besides the master-servant reversals, the image of Sir Pitt Crawley at the feet of Becky Sharp has its own set of implications; so has the Pall Mall Gazette, "written by gentlemen for gentlemen" - by Shandon in the Fleet, where he is imprisoned for debt; so has Sir Francis Clavering's effusive gratitude to his black-mailer for a present of money. In a sustained ironic passage concerning the landlady Miss Honeyman, the writer even propounds the advantages of having come down in the world:

Many people give themselves extreme pains to frequent company where all around them are their superiors, and where, do what you will, you will be subject to continual mortification. ... The true pleasure in life is to live with your inferiors. Be the cock of your village; the queen of your coterie; and, besides very great persons, the people whom Fate has specially endowed with this kindly consolation, are those who have seen what are called better days - those who have had losses. I am like Caesar, and of a noble mind: if I cannot be first in Piccadilly, let me try Hatton Garden and see whether I cannot lead the ton there.

If I cannot take the lead at White's or the Travellers', let me be president of the Jolly Sandboys at the 'Bag of Nails', and blackball everybody who does not pay me honour. If my darling Bessy cannot go out of a drawing-room until a baronet's niece (ha! ha! a baronet's niece, forsooth!) has walked before her, let us frequent company where we shall be first; and how can we be the first unless we select our inferiors for our associates? This kind of pleasure is to be had by almost everybody, and at scarce any cost. (Nc, 119)

Such a passage brings us back to Bagehot's irritation at Thackeray's obsession with proving that tenth-rate people are always trying to behave like ninth-rate people; or to the exasperation of another critic at the English novel's preoccupation with snobbery:

Who cares whether Pamela finally exasperates Mr. B. into marriage, whether Mr. Elton is more or less than moderately genteel, whether it is sinful for Pendennis nearly to kiss the porter's daughter, whether young men from Boston can ever be as truly refined as middle-aged women in Paris, whether the District Officer's fiancée ought to see so much of Dr. Aziz, whether Lady Chatterley ought to be made love to by the gamekeeper, even if he was an officer during the war? Who cares?⁶

Of course English novels are about a great deal more than this, and so are Thackeray's. But an ironist has this in common with a snob, which makes snobbery a subject particularly suitable for him: that he too is by nature a discriminator. He is constantly drawing implicit distinctions between appearance and reality, or what should be and what is, or what is hoped for and what is achieved, or what is deserved and what is awarded. A system of values that is at the same time elaborately developed and elaborately distorted, at the same time true because it exists and operates, and false because according to a higher system of values it should not, is a subject that only an ironist can fully exploit. G.G. Sedgwick describes Socratic irony as "a war upon Appearance waged by a man who knows Reality: now it is a process deadly to empty pretence, now a sort of kindly pruning vital to growth in truth." This perfectly describes Thackeray's kind of irony when his

subject is social pretension.

A higher system of values does exist within the pages of Thackeray's books. Man as Thackeray describes him is, certainly, a social animal, but this is a description rather than a definition.⁷ He cannot exist apart from his environment, but he is more than his environment. Middle-class parents, the army, and India can produce a Colonel Newcome as well as a Major Pendennis.

Balzac related the social world of La Comédie Humaine to the Nature, "red in tooth and claw," that was being described by contemporary evolutionary studies:

Among animals the drama is limited; there is scarcely any confusion; they turn and rend each other - that is all. Men, too, rend each other; but their greater or less intelligence makes the struggle far more complicated.⁸

Thackeray, too, shows this kind of society, where the main motive is survival (it is, to be sure, a highly refined sort of social 'survival' that Thackeray is talking about, with an elaborately developed system of determining "the fittest"); but he always shows - as does Balzac too, for that matter - that it should not be the only one.

He depicts society as he sees it, as *Vanity Fair*, where every man is out for himself; but he is always conscious that this is the fallen world, which could conceivably be a better one; and he is concerned with sin, not just with the facts of survival. It is a world in which man may be living "without God,"⁹ but it is not one in which God does not exist. It is a diseased world, but his very conception of it as diseased means that he can conceive of a healthier state; he is not merely a chronicler of things as they are; he is also contrasting them, implicitly and often explicitly too, with things as they should be.

A great part of his genius for realistic characterization is his ability to define the limits within which his characters are merely social animals, out to get what they can for themselves, and the point where they become moral beings with a more complex code of behaviour than that dictated by the principle of survival. Rawdon Crawley, for instance, seems at the outset of the novel to be the dedicated member of Vanity Fair, with few scruples about gambling or cheating tradesmen. But he is unexpectedly loyal and affectionate as a husband and father, and he has a sense of honour that will not allow him to be a complacent cuckold even for the sake of social advancement.¹⁰ Even a minor character like George Barnes in The Newcomes is given a chance to define himself morally: he makes the decision to stand by his mother against his rich grandmother, Lady Kew, with the rueful reflection, 'She always hated me; but if she had by chance left me a legacy, there it goes' (498). In this way characters who initially appear as satirical types expand into fully rounded individuals.

It is in his depiction of the social struggle that Thackeray is most obviously a moralist. With all his realism, he has his explicit message. Gordon Ray asserts that Thackeray attained the high position of being considered with Dickens and Carlyle the third great moralist of his age "chiefly by redefining the gentlemanly ideal to fit a middle-class rather than an aristocratic context."¹¹

From The Book of Snobs onwards Thackeray was constantly attacking the system of values by which men are venerated for their birth or their money or their social status rather than for their moral qualities. To be a gentleman, as he preaches, is "to be honest, to be gentle, to be generous, to be brave, to be wise, and, possessing all these qualities,

to exercise them in the most graceful outward manner" (IX, 270). Similarly, though the word "snob," when it came into use at the beginning of the century, meant simply a member of the lower classes, Thackeray "boldly redefined the word in terms of moral qualities rather than of class; a snob was 'he who meanly admires mean things.'" And there are snobs to be found in all classes, up to royalty itself.

So Thackeray is always contrasting the gentlemanly standard of the bad old days, often represented by the Regency, with "fat old Florizel" himself as its epitome, with a new moral one. Barry Lyndon is a representative of the old standard. He constantly talks of "honour" and "gentlemanly behaviour," but for him honour means not being found out, and gentlemanly behaviour is simply disregarding moral responsibility; as for wisdom, his mentor teaches him that a thorough acquaintance with genealogy is "the only knowledge befitting a gentleman" (BL, 127). He is ignorant, profligate, dishonest, a libertine and a gambler. He is disgusted that the gentlemanly pastime of gambling is condemned by "your modern moral world. It is a conspiracy of the middle classes against gentlemen - it is only the shopkeeper cant which is to go down nowadays" (BL, 129).

So there is the repeated contrast through the novels of the man who thinks he is a gentleman because of his position in society, and the man who really is one by virtue of his moral behaviour. The dandy George Osborne is contrasted with the true gentleman Dobbin; the pretentious Brandon with the cockney but gentle Fitch in A Shabby-Genteel Story; the dashing rake of a Pretender with the more truly royal Esmond; the degenerate Captain Baker with the generous merchant Lovel; and so on. The true lady is similarly independent of class. So we are told Amelia

is a lady despite being a bankrupt's daughter; so is Helen Pendennis, although she was a dependent; so is Caroline Brandon in Philip, although she drops her h's.

So far as Thackeray's novels are sermons, they are very lively ones, for they include much dramatic dialogue by the devil's advocate; and Thackeray knew this being's tone of voice to perfection. Besides Barry Lyndon, Major Pendennis (who judges a gentleman by his parents, or his title, or his income, or his ability to gamble - by anything, in fact, rather than his moral qualities) is the best embodiment of this role; but of course the narrator himself constantly plays the part, and plays it so well that he has been taken to be the devil's advocate and a snob himself. So the tension is maintained between the two sets of values; and much of the page-to-page liveliness of the novels consists in the depiction, now from one angle and now from another, of 'the spurns That patient merit of the unworthy takes.' Love, art, religion, and morality are incongruously subjected to evaluation by the material standards of social success. The world is populated by snobs, by people who "meanly admire mean things." It is this inverted system of values that the ironist undertakes to expose.

Many of Thackeray's recurring scenes and images represent this subordination of the higher to the lower. Lady Wittlesea's, the chapel which is owned and promoted by a Jewish wine-merchant who keeps his surplus stock in the basement, comes to stand for all that is merely fashionable rather than spiritual in Victorian religious practice. A hypocritical libertine like Barnes Newcome gives lectures on "The Poetry of the Affections" as part of his political campaign. J.J. Ridley, a brilliant painter, is patronized because he is the son of a butler.

The scene of the sale of a bankrupt's effects, which Thackeray presented in Vanity Fair and again in The Newcomes, has deep ironic reverberations, for it shows memories and associations, all the stuff of human emotion, being sold as merchandise. His recurring image of the marriage market presents love as a commodity that can be bought and bargained over like any other, so that even the "lovers" have accommodated themselves to the transaction:

'I always told you, Maria, that it was your money he loved, not you,' [says one sister sweetly to another].

'He selected me and my money at any rate: he didn't choose you and yours,' replied Maria, tossing up her head (VF, 536).

The funeral of the rich old relative is another recurring ironic scene; for as the heirs are trained in the values of Vanity Fair they are of course glad of the death, but as they are trained in its conventions, they must put on a display of grief. The deaths of Miss Crawley, Sir Brian Newcome, Lady Kew, and Lord Ringwood all cause a secret thrill of joy among their survivors, who nevertheless wear their mourning with ostentation; and Sir Pitt Crawley is followed to his grave by "the family in black coaches, with their handkerchiefs up to their noses, ready for the tears which did not come" (VF, 530).

Miss Crawley in Vanity Fair is a centre for ironic depiction of this inverted system of values, which imposes at the same time mercenariness and the rule that it must be concealed. Though Miss Crawley professes to have a mind above money and titles, and to judge by merit alone, when it comes to the test no-one is more completely ruled by the values and conventions of the World: so, though she would not mind if her nephew James Crawley had an orgy on claret, she cannot forgive his drinking anything so vulgar as gin. She makes full use of



Miss Crawley's affectionate relatives

"Miss Crawley ... had a balance at her banker's which would have made her beloved anywhere" (Vanity Fair, 103).

the power given her by "a balance at her banker's which would have made her beloved anywhere" (103). In the elaborate ritual of adulation that goes on round her and her banker's account, her devotees are ready to assign any motive to their attention rather than the actual mercenary one. When young Pitt, professing to have scruples about her lack of religion, says piously, "what is money compared to our souls?" his father shrewdly answers him, "You mean that the old lady won't leave her money to you?" (112).

So far as Thackeray is a preacher on Vanity Fair, vanitas vanitatum is the text of his sermon. Man's pursuit of happiness in the form of worldly success is a futile endeavour. We are constantly shown how wealth or social advancement does not bring happiness: in Miss Crawley and Sir Pitt, dying fearful and alone; in the particular hell which is Lord Steyne's habitation; or in the woes of Lady Clavering, who laments "I've got money to be sure, and I'm a lady, and people fancy I'm very happy, but I ain't" (Pnd, 563). Becky and Beatrix are bored by their own success. Clive Newcome "lay in a bed of down, and tossed and tumbled there" (Nc, 827), and Philip Firmin is happier in poverty than in prosperity. George Warrington confesses, "There came a period of my life, when having reached the summit of felicity I was quite tired of the prospect I had there" (Vns, 905).

Thackeray is always exploring the irony that the feverish struggle up the social ladder affords no lasting satisfaction when the summit is achieved. He shows how we

Wear ourselves and never rest,
Until we reach the ripest fruit of all,
That perfect bliss and sole felicity,
The sweet fruition of an earthly crown -12

but the fruit, however ripe, is sour, or else 'rotten ere it be half ripe;' and, as in Doyle's illustration, the appetite of the man who gets to it is soon cloyed.

At the same time, however, the preacher is prepared to call in question the text of his own sermon: and in Pendennis it is suggested that the pronouncement of Ecclesiastes is a stale residue of spent passion rather than the full vintage of accumulated experience: "the scorn and weariness which cries vanitas vanitatum is but the lassitude of the sick appetite palled with pleasure" (Pnd, 767). Lord Steyne, who is a true cynic as Thackeray is not, has however arrived at the same conclusion that "everybody is striving for what is not worth the having" (VF, 607). Though in some moods the narrator exposes the emptiness of all worldly things, in others he is prepared to remember that he is a man as well as a moralist, and that the former role may be more real than the latter:

It is all vanity to be sure: but who will not own to liking a little of it? I should like to know what well-constituted mind, merely because it is transitory, dislikes roast-beef? That is vanity; but may every man who reads this, have a wholesome portion of it through life.... Yes, let us eat our fill of the vain thing, and be thankful therefor. And let us make the best of Becky's aristocratic pleasures likewise - for these too, like all other mortal delights, were but transitory. (VF, 634)

"And so the preacher is vanity, too," he concludes (Ph, 210).

Thackeray's sense of context, of the background against which a character or an action becomes ironically significant, extends to the social background of more than one age. As a social historian by inclination, he has a sense of historical irony which also pervades his novels, and which is part of his motive in writing sequences of novels rather than independent works. Not only is a man's class and present

standing in the world important, but his forbears and their status and values are significant too. Family trees, like those of the Esmonds, the Newcomes, and the Warringtons, are an accumulation of relevant information about the action that is dramatized. The Virginians, for instance, is pervaded by the tension between the existing house of Castlewood and the descendants of the abdicated Viscount. We may not know much about Thomas Newcome, the father common to Colonel Newcome and to Brian and Hobson Newcome; and yet there is a thematic point in the fact that the colonel is the child of a love match, while the banking brothers are the offspring of a mercenary marriage.

The feeling for changing moral values, as well as changing social position, is part of Thackeray's sense of historical irony. He sees the Victorian age as more morally scrupulous than the Regency or the eighteenth century, but also as more hypocritical: he is always conscious, for instance, that a modern public would not tolerate the full history of a Man, such as Tom Jones provides, but that "we must drape him, and give him a certain conventional simper" (Pnd, xxxvi). So he is able to contrast the plain wickedness of the Castlewood family in The Virginians, who are avaricious, heartless and profligate, with the devious "respectability" of the Newcomes, whose similar avarice and heartlessness are to some extent mitigated by the necessity they are under to disguise them.

Thackeray can portray with a deeply-founded sympathy the relations between the generations. Major Pendennis is a vivid example of his ability to show the values and manners of one generation surviving into the next. Similarly, he exploits the survival of the aristocratic standards of the Gaunts in the Victorian age through the

figure of Lady Kew. Her evangelical daughter-in-law, Lady Walham, totally rebels against her Regency code, but she manages nevertheless to assert herself to some extent over her grandchildren, Ethel and Kew, for whom she is at once more remote and more authoritative.

It is partly his powerful sense of historical context that enables Thackeray to show a character aging as convincingly as he does: Rawdon Crawley settling from dashing rake to staid and portly father; Major Pendennis sinking from middle-aged Regency buck to querulous old man. Beatrix passes from enchanting girlhood to tarnished womanhood in Esmond; and her reincarnation as the Baroness Bernstein in The Virginians, which Saintsbury called "one of the greatest achievements of art in prose fiction,"¹³ shows her convincingly as an old woman, unmistakably the same, yet as evidently changed from the Beatrix of Esmond. At her death scene, where she is tended by young George Warrington, her delirious wanderings as she recalls her youth and speaks to Esmond suggest the co-existence of past and present; but the two are in ironic tension, for George is only Esmond's grandson, and she is only "always labouring under the same delusion - that [he] was the Henry of past times, who had loved her and had been forsaken by her, whose bones were lying far away by the banks of the Potomac" (Vns, 881).

As a sequel to Esmond, The Virginians is pervasively ironic. It was a bold conception to follow so highly concentrated a work with a novel that considers the characters and events from the viewpoint of forty years later. Esmond himself as a writer was so keenly self-conscious, and so deeply concerned with the relationships and issues in which he was involved, that it is something of a shock to find him

and his political, moral, and sexual preoccupations exposed to the loosely sceptical assessment of his descendants. The Virginians gives a new slant on the earlier novel, and shows, but without invalidating it, just how limited the narrator's viewpoint had been. Beatrix, the woman he adored, appears as a crusty and cynical old woman; Rachel, the saint he had worshipped, is discussed as 'almost old enough to be his grandmother' (205), and 'not very commode à vivre' (560); and his noble act of self-abnegation is shown merely to have put the title and estate into the hands of a set of wastrels and scoundrels.

The chronological sequence of novels, from Esmond through The Virginians, Vanity Fair, Pendennis, and The Newcomes to Philip, allows Thackeray to explore some of the ironies of heredity. Our understanding of George Warrington of The Virginians is increased by seeing him as the grandson of Henry Esmond, and himself the grandfather of George Warrington of Pendennis; and to consider Madam Esmond of Virginia as the daughter of Rachel, Lady Castlewood, is to illuminate certain qualities of both characters that are not evident when they are considered in isolation.

The wide spread of time that is covered by each novel, and by the whole sequence, makes available to Thackeray a kind of irony that consists in the contrast of the single dramatized event with the whole span of history. Empson points out,

the human mind has two main scales on which to measure time. The large one takes the length of a human life as its unit, so that there is nothing to be done about life.... The small one takes its unit from the conscious moment, and it is from this that you consider the neighbouring space,... delicacies of social tone, and your personality.¹⁴

To shift from one of these scales to another is an ironic device of which Thackeray is a master. At the end of Vanity Fair Dobbin's

embrace of Amelia is seen as the momentary consummation of a lifetime's longing; then this recedes into disappointment and finally insignificance in the wide vision that takes a life-time as its unit: "Ah, Vanitas Vanitatum! Which of us is happy in this world? Which of us has his desire? or, having it, is satisfied?" (878). So Beatrix Esmond, the sun around whom so many satellites revolve, becomes just another courtesan in the indiscriminating spread of history; and Esmond's great enterprise, his attempt to restore the Pretender and re-establish the Stuart succession, becomes at the end of the novel just another plot that failed. It is an effect which Thackeray has many ways of achieving. The elderly persona, whose passion is spent but whose memories are still powerfully alive, can look back on his life either as a grey fabric of continuous effort and disillusion, or as a sequence of vital experiences. Thackeray alternates between a close-up view of the minute distinctions between individuals and their aspirations, with a vivid evocation of feverish activity, and the panoramic view in which distinctions are blurred and all activity seems pointless.

Similarly, the wide range of characters, and of social and historical allusion, allows Thackeray to shift the emphasis between the individual and the society, and to explore the tensions between them. In Vanity Fair he shows a nation mobilizing itself for war, and focuses on the excitement of some few of the participants who are drawn with the tide. And then with the close of the Waterloo number the nation's triumph becomes for one individual, Amelia, a prostrating catastrophe. The Newcomes shows a prosperous society, with Barnes Newcome as its epitome and thriving inhabitant, which yet utterly crushes Clive Newcome.

An acute sense of social context is essential to the realist, who must create a convincing milieu for his characters, a world of which they are a part and a product. Thackeray's genius in this kind of creation is undisputed, and was recognized from the first. Roscoe, a shrewd and unbiassed judge, writing in 1856 before Thackeray's death, called him "probably the greatest painter of manners that ever lived."¹⁵

This feeling for context is a great asset to the ironist, whose business consists in maintaining a double viewpoint: on the individual act or word or character, and on the total situation, or attitude, or society of which each is a part. A single incident, not ironic in itself, becomes so when seen in relation to a chain of incidents; a single speech signifies one thing in itself, but is revealed as signifying something totally different when the whole situation of which it is a part is simultaneously in mind; and a character's estimation of himself or his behaviour is ironically exposed by a wider vision that comprehends the estimation of the society to which he belongs.

So a fully-realized social context, such as Thackeray the realist provides, gives added scope to Thackeray the ironist. He has composed a vivid and intricate picture of society as a backdrop for the stage on which his major characters perform their actions. On this stage he is concerned to illuminate the incongruities. One part of the backdrop of society will be inconsistent with another, where two systems of values clash, or where one system is asserted and another practised. Or the incongruity may consist in a contrast between the tone of the backdrop and the figure on the stage who does not blend with it. Moreover, the design and illumination on the backdrop is itself changing

with time, so that a figure or an action which at one moment is in harmony with its background may at another be in counterpoint to it.

It is these contrasts and incongruities which Thackeray, in his depiction of society and his characters' relations within it, succeeds in illuminating with his irony.

III

IRONY IN MORAL VISION

As Thackeray's style received a decisive initial impulse from his desire to burlesque the extravagances of other writers, so his subject matter was determined by a wish to expose the vices of society. From the first his elected role, as writer and as moralist, was corrective. To some extent he appointed himself as the scourge of literary and social pretension.

The danger in assuming such a role is that the writer will adopt a 'holier-than-thou' attitude which may become exasperating. Thackeray does manage to avoid this in his early writings, but nevertheless they show a certain lack of sympathy which distinguishes them from his later writing and his major novels. In The Yellowplush Papers and Catherine pretension and brutality are certainly exposed, but at the expense of sympathy and involvement. In Catherine he even set out to create "a wholesome nausea," a disgust for the kind of heroes and subject-matter chosen by the Newgate novelists; so that where there is sympathy it appears not as part of the writer's intention, but in spite of it. He meant his readers to laugh at and not with his characters, and if he was not always trying to provoke nausea, at least he seemed ready to provoke a sneer.

Gordon Ray traces the events in Thackeray's life which changed his attitude to his characters and his readers: the loss of his patrimony, his marriage and the birth of his children, and then his wife's insanity and his attempt to fill the role of both parents when he was re-united with his children:¹ all this made him more compassionate as

a writer, so that his tone changed from the contemptuous to the humorous. It is a change that is seen in the evolution of the unfeeling Yellowplush of Fraser's Magazine in the 1830's into the more tender Jeames de la Pluche of Punch in the 1840's - who, though he pursues success and the world for a while, marries the faithful Mary Anne in the end. From the time of The Great Hoggarty Diamond, Thackeray's increased sympathy is seen not only in the greater incidence of good characters in his fiction, but also in the author's ability to associate himself with his creatures, and to enter his work as a similarly fallible human being: "a man and a brother" (VF, 96) as well as a preacher.

If he became less of a castigator, he became more of a moralist. The Book of Snobs, though no less amusing than his early writings for Fraser's Magazine, is more earnest. À propos of its famous concluding paragraph on Punch's role as the humorous castigator of the vices of society, he wrote to Mark Lemon, another member of the Punch staff:

What I mean applies to my own case & that of all of us - who set up as Satirical-Moralists - and having such a vast multitude of readers whom we not only amuse but teach. ... A few years ago I should have sneered at the idea of setting up as a teacher at all, and perhaps at this pompous and pious way of talking about a few papers of jokes in Punch - but I have got to believe in the business, and in many other things since then. And our profession seems to me to be as serious as the parson's own. (Letters II, 282)

Once he had 'got to believe in the business,' Thackeray took very seriously the writer's role as preacher. He always tended to judge his own work, as well as that of others, on a basis of its ethics rather than on any purely aesthetic grounds. If humorous fiction was his medium, entertainment was by no means his only object. He is prepared to joke about the tendency of his books to put their readers to sleep, but not so readily about the system of values which they recommend.

By the time he wrote the lectures on the English Humourists, he was ready to define the role of the humourist as he saw it, not only for the eighteenth-century writers of whom he spoke, but for himself as well. In this definition he is more concerned to emphasize the moral function of the humourist, and his capacity for feeling, than his ability to make his readers laugh:

The humorous writer professes to awaken and direct your love, your pity, your kindness - your scorn for untruth, pretension, imposture - your tenderness for the weak, the poor, the oppressed, the unhappy. To the best of his means and ability he comments on all the ordinary actions and passions of life almost. He takes upon himself to be the week-day preacher, so to speak. (XIII, 470)

If we consider Thackeray as a "week-day preacher," the subject of his sermons is clear enough. It is the moral of The Great Hoggarty Diamond. In this fable Samuel Titmarsh is given a diamond pin by his aunt, as a result of which he gains an entrée into Society and is noticed by his employer and promoted over the heads of the other clerks and is able to marry. Happiness seems at his fingers' ends. Then comes the reversal: the diamond, which had seemed a talisman, turns out to be a jinx; the aunt who had seemed like a fairy god-mother becomes a domineering domestic tyrant, and the kind employer a swindler who has used Titmarsh as an instrument and a scapegoat. Titmarsh goes to prison, and his first child dies. When he pawns the diamond to pay for the funeral, his luck changes: his wife finds a position as a wet-nurse in a kind rich family who pay his debts and at last give him a position as a steward of their estate. The happiness of worldly success proves to be not only transitory but delusive, and true happiness is achieved in domestic love, through the milk of human kindness.

This can be read as the moral of all Thackeray's books. So he

summed it up himself when, defending himself from the charge that he was a great humourist but not a great moralist,² he wrote in 1855:

I think please God my books are written by a God-loving man. and the morality - the vanity of success and of all but Love and Goodness - is not that the teaching of Domini Nostri? (Letters, III, 467)

This moral of "the vanity of success and of all but Love and Goodness" gives him a structural principle for his novels. The contrast and conflict between the forces of the World - social prestige, and material success - on the one hand, and of love and goodness on the other, is the basis of much of the action and moral tension in his books, as well as of the structural pattern.

So in Vanity Fair Becky, ingenious and selfish, pursues worldly success at the expense of domestic affection and the feelings of people like Briggs and Jos whom she crushes on her way; by contrast Amelia, existing almost entirely in her emotions, is ready to sacrifice any material advantage for her husband or her son. The fortunes of these two are delicately balanced through the novel; and Becky ends with being rejected by the world which she had almost conquered, while Amelia is rewarded with a loving husband. The same sort of contrast exists between the characters and fortunes of Osborne and Dobbin, Amelia's first and second husbands.

In Pendennis the opposing forces of love and the world are still more elaborately balanced, and the conflict even takes on the nature of allegory, with Arthur Pendennis as the character who, torn between the two motives, must find an equilibrium between them. The cover design shows a young man hesitating between a fully-clothed brunette Victorian wife with her children, and a blond siren with a fish's



"Here, on one side, is Self and Ambition and Advancement; and Right and Love on the other" (The Newcomes, 502).
Cover design for the original monthly numbers of Pendennis.

tail (reminiscent of Becky's 'hideous monster's tail') with a little satyr for an attendant. For Thackeray sacred and profane love were not so much the spiritual and the sensual, nor the married and the adulterous, as the domestic and the worldly:³ for the attendant of the siren is carrying a coach and a crown, the symbols of social success. So Pendennis has to choose between the influence of his worldly and selfish old uncle, Major Pendennis, and of his saintly and self-denying mother, Helen, and between their rival candidates for his hand, the ambitious and blond Blanche, and the moral and brunette Laura: one will bring him a dowry, a baronet for a father-in-law, and a seat in Parliament; the other will bring him love. Pen, of course, chooses Laura, though he only just escapes being consumed by the siren: and the frontispiece of the second volume shows the repentant young man in the motherly embrace of the brunette.

In Esmond the contrast is between Rachel the loving mother and Beatrix the worldly daughter (though here the usual colour scheme is changed, for Beatrix is a brown beauty while her mother is the orthodox fair angel) - and again the hero finds true happiness in uniting himself with love rather than ambition.

In The Newcomes the two branches of the Newcome family, one descending from a marriage for love and the other from a marriage for money, are the opposing factions, with the quarrel between Colonel Newcome and Barnes representing the natural antipathy between love and the World. Here it is Ethel Newcome, rather than the hero Clive, who must, like Pendennis and Esmond, learn from experience to reject the glamorous life of social success and riches to find real happiness in love - to turn from Lord Farintosh, the best catch of the season, to

the unconnected artist, Clive. Her worldly mentor, Lady Kew, corresponds to the Major in Pendennis, as her moral guide, Colonel Newcome, corresponds to Helen Pendennis. The unhappy and even disastrous marriages which were made for money are contrasted with the domestic bliss of Arthur Pendennis, who, now happily united with Laura, acts as the narrator.

The Virginians brings a geographical contrast into operation, as well as that between the characters and their motives, as the genuine warmth and hospitality of Virginian society are contrasted with the coldly calculated social relationships of the old country. In the two stories of the twin brothers, they are torn between the self-seeking family at Castlewood and the kind Lamberts, who act as good Samaritans. Harry Warrington must choose between the counsel of General Lambert and that of the Baroness Bernstein, the aged Beatrix. Similarly George Warrington, before he is united with the loving Theo, must see through the wiles of the siren Lydia van den Bosch.

In Lovel the Widower and Philip this structural pattern is not so marked, though implicitly the same moral choice is before the protagonists in all their actions, finding expression in Lovel's choice of the governess after his worldly first wife, and in Philip's exuberance in his poverty and love, after his gloomy days as a rich young man. Philip too is for a while subject to the schemes of the mercenary blond, Agnes Twysden, but finds happiness with the brownhaired Charlotte Baynes.

All this in summary inevitably sounds glib and perhaps platitudinous. But Thackeray has space in his novels to convey how wisdom must be paid for in the hard coin of experience. Samuel Titmarsh's dead child cannot be revived; and though we may feel that Pen has the reward

without the merit, Ethel Newcome's growth in moral consciousness, the environment which makes it necessary, and the experience which makes it possible, are carefully and convincingly conveyed. At his best Thackeray can evoke the conflicting motive forces of love and environment with a subtle completeness.

Of course to spell out a moral for such works as Esmond or The Newcomes is to make them sound flimsy and vapid, and we know that it goes only a very little way towards expressing the total significance of the book. Nevertheless, this 'moral' to Thackeray's novels exists, and is there for him to cite when he is accused of being no moralist, and to prove in general that "Thackeray was on the side of the angels."⁴

But if he has chosen the angels' side, the battle with the other forces is by no means over. The meting out of rewards and punishments at the end of a book may point an explicit moral, but the rest of the book can be a prolonged qualification of it, as well as a preparation for it.

Pendennis as the ambitious young man with a taste for being a dandy and a healthy appetite for literary and social success, with his readiness to accept the world as it is against the moral idealism of his friend Warrington - this figure is the one we remember, rather than Pendennis as the prodigal returned to the maternal embrace, the submissive husband of the righteous Laura. And it was the former identity that Thackeray had in mind when Charlotte Brontë called him "Mr. Warrington," and he corrected her with "No, you mean 'Arthur Pendennis.'"⁵

Thackeray's identification of himself with the worldly Pendennis rather than the severely moral Warrington suggests that the tension between the two sets of values is never fully resolved. Speculation on

whether Becky or Amelia is the true heroine of Vanity Fair may be perennially interesting, but of course there can be no final answer. Amelia has been taken as the heroine, and as an ideal of Victorian womanhood; and she has been exposed as insipid, as foolish and finally as parasitic. Correspondingly the status of "that charming wicked little Becky" has risen and fallen, so that her defenders have been prepared to accuse Thackeray of false characterization in the incidents where he shows her at her worst.⁶

But Thackeray's irony can work in many directions at once. He really knows, not just charm and wickedness, but the charm of wickedness; and it is his strength that he can illuminate either one without obscuring the other. Similarly he can have a genuine admiration for the goodness and love that are embodied in figures like Amelia or Helen Pendennis, while being able to put his finger on just those points where their very goodness becomes exasperating, or mistaken, or even, by a total reversal, itself wicked.

He does not resolve the moral tensions he creates. One reading of Vanity Fair may tell us the story of a good girl and a bad girl, in which the good girl at last marries the right man and lives happily ever after, while the bad girl is consigned to a sort of social limbo. Another reading tells us the story of a good girl and a bad girl, in which the bad girl becomes a means of salvation while the good girl ends by destroying those she loves. Thackeray writes both of these stories. At least, he has both potentialities in mind, and can write in one direction or the other without losing sight of either. His moral vision is one that can take into account all the ambiguities of how good in operation can become evil, and evil in

operation can work towards good.

It was the ironic nature of his moral vision that caused him to be distrusted and attacked by contemporary critics. So Roscoe, the man who objected that "it grates on our ears to hear English ladies talking, as they do sometimes, of 'that charming wicked little Becky,'" wrote:

We do maintain that there is a sin against good taste and right moral influence in mingling too intimately real vice and the ridiculous; they may be alternated, but not mixed, still less almost chemically combined, after Mr. Thackeray's fashion.⁷

That vice should not be made appealing was the maxim of the Thackeray of 1839 who wrote Catherine with the object of showing vice to be disgusting; but the Thackeray who wrote the novels knew that vice can be attractive, and that moral integrity, as well as literary realism, consisted in showing it as such. He had developed the vision and the ability to show how vice and virtue - or vice and charm, or virtue and mischief-making - can be combined, and his moral vision is the sharper, and not the more blurred, for its increased subtlety. For if he concocts an 'almost chemical' compound, he is still aware, as the careful reader is aware, of the nature of the elements which compose it.

As the number of times that Thackeray uses the word 'genius' ironically is an indication of his artistic attitude, so is the repeated use of the words 'good' and 'virtuous' in an ironic sense a suggestion of his moral outlook. There is a long list of self-righteous characters in his novels, particularly women, who make capital of their morality. In an age when the Puritan heritage encouraged an equation of reward with desert, and wealth with merit, Thackeray frequently depicts the Victorian equivalent of Burns's Holy Willie:

Yet I am here, a chosen sample,
 To show Thy grace is great and ample;
 I'm here a pillar o' Thy temple,
 Strong as a rock,
 A guide, a buckler, and example
 To a' Thy flock....

But, Lord, remember me and mine
 Wi' mercies temporal and divine,
 That I for grace and gear may shine
 Excell'd by nane;
 And a' the glory shall be Thine -
 Amen, Amen!

So Osborne can say of Sedley that 'He was a better man than I was... by ten thousand pounds.' Vanity Fair is about a set of people who are 'greedy, pompous, mean, and perfectly self-satisfied and at ease about their superior virtue' (Letters II, 309). Miss Crawley, the godless old heiress, is beset by people who are trying to get her money under the guise of saving her soul. The Anglican clergyman's wife, Mrs. Bute Crawley, who "thought herself one of the most virtuous women in England" (499), rushes to Miss Crawley's bedside when she is sick, and proceeds so to frighten her with apprehensions about her body and her soul that she almost succeeds in killing her:

Thus, for instance, Mrs. Bute, with the best intentions no doubt in the world, and wearing herself to death as she did by forgoing sleep, dinner, fresh air, for the sake of her invalid sister-in-law, carried her conviction of the old lady's illness so far that she almost managed her into her coffin. (VF, 231)

A parallel figure, who similarly confounds bodily with spiritual welfare, the evangelical Lady Southdown, administers quack medicine and quack religion alternately to her protégées, and "would order Gaffer Jones to be converted, as she would order Goody Hicks to take a James's powder" (VF, 414). She too is after Miss Crawley's money, as is her hypocritical son-in-law, Pitt.

The Tushers, père et fils, with their smug conviction of their

own good deserts and their shrewd eye to the main chance, are similar characters in Esmond. The whole of The Newcomes exposes the Newcome kind of 'goodness' - a goodness which consists in a prudent avoidance of scandal and in lip-service to popular morality that covers a complete callousness about the concerns of others. The part of "Consummate Virtue" is personified in Mrs. Hobson Newcome, who is always finding moral lapses in the people whose wealth or social position she envies. Her counterpart in The Virginians is again the hero's aunt by marriage: "My Lady Warrington, one of the tallest and most virtuous of her sex, who had goodness forever on her lips and 'Heaven in her eye' ... had the world in her other eye, and an exceedingly shrewd desire of pushing herself in it" (828). The attack is continued, in Lovel the Widower, on Lady Baker, "who, to be sure, might do duty for a villain, but she considers herself as virtuous a woman as ever was born" (57). The original of Lady Baker is Lady Kicklebury of The Kickleburys on the Rhine, on whose species Thackeray, in the person of Michael Angelo Titmarsh, had first declared war, with a resumé of his reasons:

'She has no idea but that everything she says, and thinks, and does is right. And no doubt she never did rob a church; and was a faithful wife to Sir Thomas, and pays her tradesmen. Confound her virtue! It is that which makes her so wonderful - that brass armour in which she walks impenetrable - not knowing what pity is, or charity; crying sometimes when she is vexed, or thwarted, but laughing never; cringing, and domineering by the same natural instinct - never doubting herself above all. Let us rise, and revolt against these people, Lankin, Let us war with them, and smite them utterly. It is to use against these, especially, that Scorn and Satire were invented.'

'And the ahimal you attack,' says Lankin, 'is provided with a hide to defend him - it is a common ordinance of nature.' (X, 264)

Thackeray's attack is not just on the Pecksniff species of hypocrite, like Barnes Newcome or Mrs. Bute, who under their whited exteriors must be quite conscious of their own mercenary motivation; but

it is aimed also at those exasperating people whose complete confidence in their own merit makes them unapproachable, simply not amenable to any suggestion that there may be another opinion worth considering than their own. Here the emphasis of his depiction progresses from the satirical towards the psychological, and the issues become more serious.

There is a general attack on dedicated do-gooders in Philip:

If somebody or some Body of savants would write the history of the harm that has been done in the world by people who believe themselves to be virtuous, what a queer, edifying book it would be, and how poor oppressed rogues might look up! Who burns the Protestants? - the virtuous Catholics to be sure. Who roasts the Catholics? - the virtuous Reformers.... Who scorns? Who persecutes? who doesn't forgive? - the virtuous Mrs. Grundy. She remembers her neighbour's peccadilloes to the third and fourth generation. (103)

To be unforgiving is the proper vice of the virtuous. "Those who know a really good woman are aware that she is in no hurry to forgive" (VF, 506), Thackeray says of Mrs. Bute. But his exposure of this quality is not limited to his creation of minor characters like her or Lady Kicklebury or Mrs. Hobson Newcome. These, we can see, are not really good at all, for all their possible absence of vices, for they lack the positive virtues which Thackeray valued - humility, generosity, selflessness and above all love. It is by a merely verbal irony that they are called 'good' and 'virtuous.' But Thackeray's moral irony goes deeper than this; for much of the censure that is applicable to them is applicable to those characters whom he does represent as really good. "The wicked are wicked no doubt, and they go astray and they fall, and they come by their deserts: but who can tell the mischief which the very virtuous do?" (Nc, 246). This is said à propos of Mrs. Hobson Newcome; but it can apply not only to her kind, but to the major saintly characters in his books - to Amelia, and Helen Pendennis, and Rachel

Esmond, and Colonel Newcome - as well. The moral pattern of all Thackeray's novels suggests that "goodness" is defined in terms of the pursuit of love rather than of worldly success, and by this definition these characters are "good," for they are all loving, and social prestige is more or less indifferent to them. In the sorting of good and bad, they have been set aside as the sheep, while Becky, Blanche, Beatrix and Barnes are the goats; but they are still not exempt from a closer scrutiny, and a more subtle ironic exposure.

Amelia is deliberately distinguished from the "virtuous" species to which Mrs. Bute belongs, for she does not harbour malice or revel in the peccadilloes of others. When she meets Becky in Pumpernickel, she is ready to forget the part Becky had played in alienating her husband's affections: "As she had never thought or done anything mortally guilty herself, she had not that abhorrence for wickedness which distinguishes moralists much more knowing" (VF, 835). There is a double irony in operation here, however; the attack on the Unco' Guid still stands, but Amelia's readiness to re-establish intimacy with Becky is in the event more like lack of judgement than Christian forgiveness - Dobbin, for instance, knows enough to beware of Becky.

But there can be no doubt that Thackeray had a genuine value for Amelia's qualities of tenderness and gentleness. If he recognizes that Dobbin is a spooney for allowing himself to be tyrannized over and made to fetch and carry by Amelia ("This history has been written to very little purpose if the reader has not perceived that the major was a spooney," he says [844]), Thackeray can still sympathize with him and to some extent identify with him. In a letter to Mrs. Brookfield in

1848 he wrote: "I rank myself among the spoonies. Soft-heartedness seems to me better than anything better than stars and garters great intellect blazing wit &c." (Letters, II, 469).

Yet for all the emphasis on Amelia's soft-heartedness, her selfless adoration for her husband and her son, her forgiving nature, her qualifications for being a true gentlewoman, sufficient attention is given to her faults; and they are faults that are closely related to her virtues. The first and most completely exposed of her shortcomings is her lack of intelligence; and we are made aware, as in the case of her forgiveness of Becky, how many of her virtues have their origin in silliness. She is all sensibility and no sense. Feeling takes the place of thinking for her. "The Fate of Europe was Lieutenant George Osborne to her" - this is the extent of her political awareness. Becky's cleverness and knowledge of the world may be greater than befits a good woman; but Amelia's lack of these qualities is constantly subject to ironic exposure. For instance, when she is sent shopping for her trousseau by her husband, her lack of discrimination is suggested rather than stated by the final phrase of the passage: "She gave herself a little treat, obedient to her husband's orders, and purchased a quantity of lady's gear, showing a great deal of taste and elegant discernment, as all the shopfolks said" (323). And although Thackeray would occasionally seem to suggest that virtue exempts one from the necessity of thinking, again the suggestion is ironic: "It needs not to be said that this soft and gentle creature took her opinions from those people who surrounded her, such fidelity being much too humble-minded to think for itself" (322).

Amelia's shortcomings are located closer yet to her virtues.

Her capacity for feeling is a virtue, but to feel indiscriminately, to react emotionally in excess of the actual stimulus of the emotion, this is a kind of sloppy sentimentality which Thackeray is also ready to expose in her person: "The very joy of this woman was a sort of grief, or so tender, at least, that its expression was tears. Her sensibilities were so weak and tremulous, that perhaps they ought not to be talked about in a book" (489). And then her seemingly selfless dedication of her whole existence to her love for Osborne becomes itself selfish, like any over-indulgence in emotion; her parents find, for instance, that she has no attention or energy to spare for their catastrophe while she is so wrapped up in her own. Thackeray had this effect in mind from the first. Before he had written the Waterloo number he already related Amelia's part to the whole theme of the novel about Vanity Fair:

Of course you are quite right about Vanity Fair and Amelia being selfish - it is mentioned in this very number. My object is not to make a perfect character or anything like it. Dont you see how odious all the people are in the book (with the exception of Dobbin) - behind whom all there lies a dark moral I hope. What I want is to make a set of people living without God in the world (only that is a cant phrase) greedy pompous mean perfectly self-satisfied for the most part and at ease about their superior virtue. Dobbin and poor Briggs are the only 2 people with real humility as yet. Amelia's is to come, when her scoundrel of a husband is well dead with a ball in his odious bowels; when she has had sufferings, a child, and a religion - But she has at present one quality above most people whizz: LOVE - by wh. she shall be saved. (Letters, II, 309)

However, Amelia's possession of this quality of love is itself in question by the end of the book, and her final salvation is by no means certain.⁸ This ambiguity is expressed partly in terms of the parallel with Becky that is the structural principle of the book. In Number XI, for instance, the part concerned with Becky's and Rawdon's prosperous existence on nothing a year, we are told also of Amelia's hard-heartedness

towards Dobbin. Becky cheats financially, and her creditor, the poor trusting Raggles, has to suffer; Amelia cheats emotionally, by never acknowledging her debts to Dobbin, and makes him suffer just as surely and unjustly as Raggles has to suffer for Becky's fraud. Similarly, when we have been told of Becky's callousness about her adoring son, who was "worshipping a stone" (478), the image is recalled in Dobbin's thoughts of Amelia:

Amelia's letter had fallen as a blank upon him. No fidelity, no constant passion, could move her into warmth. She would not see that he loved her. Tossing in his bed, he spoke out to her. 'Good God, Amelia!' he said, 'don't you know that I only love you in the world - you, who are a stone to me - you, whom I tended through months and months of illness and grief, and who bade me farewell with a smile on your face, and forgot me before the door shut between us!' (551)

Amelia, the gentle and uncalculating, is however well aware of the chain by which she holds Dobbin, though she does not always choose to admit it. Ingenuous as she appears, she is quite conscious of the nature of their relationship, and capable of taking steps to maintain it: "She didn't wish to marry him, but she wished to keep him. She wished to give him nothing, but that he should give her all. It is a bargain not unfrequently levied in love" (853). The emphasis has shifted, in fact, from her absorbing love for George to her lack of love for Dobbin; and Amelia, in her own way, is equally an offender with Becky.

Even her love for George is 'vanity,' another of her gushings of emotion in excess of the cause. George is unworthy of her love, and her delusion even becomes deliberate. She is unhappy after a week of marriage; and after his death she spends years of her life systematically excluding from her mind much of her knowledge of him, so that she can devote herself to a picture of a dead husband which is not even a

true likeness. Dobbin finds out her real deficiency of true love in the end, and the most complete exposure of her is through his words:

'I know what your heart is capable of: it can cling faithfully to a recollection, and cherish a fancy; but it can't feel such an attachment as mine deserves to mate with, and such as I would have won from a woman more generous than you. No, you are not worthy of the love which I have devoted to you. I knew all along that the prize I had set my life on was not worth the winning; that I was a fool, with fond fancies, too, bartering away my all of truth and ardour against your little feeble remnant of love.' (853)

It takes the wicked Becky to work towards Amelia's salvation by her exposure of George's worthlessness. By this time Amelia has already almost lost Dobbin, who has meanwhile had his eyes similarly opened about her. He marries her in any case, but it is a marriage made in Vanity Fair and not in heaven; for Dobbin's love for her is revealed as vanity, just as hers for George had been vanity. Thackeray explained this in a letter to a reviewer after the novel was completed:

If I had made Amelia a higher order of woman there would have been no vanity in Dobbins falling in love with her, whereas the impression at present is that he is a fool for his pains that he has married a silly little thing and in fact has found out his error. (Letters, II, 423)

And so the novel has worked to its ironic climax. It is a climax in the sense that it is the consummation that was all along so devoutly to be wished; but it is deeply ironic, for it shows how little the prize that Dobbin has so long and so earnestly contended for was worth the winning:

He has got the prize he has been trying for all his life. The bird has come in at last. There it is with its head on his shoulder, billing and cooing close up to his heart, with soft outstretched fluttering wings. This is what he has asked for every day and every hour for eighteen years. This is what he pined after. Here it is - the summit, the end - the last page of the third volume. Good-bye, colonel - God bless you, honest William! - Farewell, dear Amelia - Grow green again, tender little parasite, round the rugged old oak to which you cling! (871)

It is possible, then, to see Amelia as the weak but tender character who is more sinned against than sinning; for it is true that she never perpetrates a deliberate act of malice, and that she always means well. But in her very passivity, if we look closer at her goodness in operation, she wreaks havoc in the lives of the people nearest to her. As a daughter she is insensitive: she is unaware of her father's extremity, and she quarrels with her mother, whom she causes to pray, "Oh, Amelia, may God send you a more dutiful child than I have had" (587). As a sister, by her indiscriminating trust she introduces into her brother's house the woman who is probably to murder him. As a wife to George, she is so insipid that she cannot prevent his flirting with another woman after two weeks of marriage, nor alienating himself from his father and getting into debt (George, to be sure, is mainly at fault here, but Amelia does not escape a sort of passive responsibility). As the beloved of Dobbin she is selfish and submissively tyrannical, and as his wife, at last, she is to be the "tender little parasite" who, at least potentially, can destroy "the rugged old oak" to which she clings.

In many ways she is most sympathetic in the role of mother, and we are meant to be touched by her devotion to Georgy and to sympathize with her pangs at having to part with him. And when he moves from her care to that of his grandfather Osborne, there is no doubt but that he has changed his guardian for the worse:

His previous education, humble and contracted as it had been, had made a much better gentleman of Georgy than any plans of his grandfather could make him. He had been brought up by a kind, weak, tender woman, who had no pride about anything, but about him, and whose heart was so pure and whose bearing was so meek and humble, that she could not but needs be a true lady. She busied herself in gentle offices and quiet duties; if she never said brilliant things,

she never spoke or thought unkind ones: guileless and artless, loving and pure, indeed how could our poor little Amelia be other than a real gentlewoman? (708)

This is the kind of eulogy that has made some readers believe that Thackeray was offering Amelia for unqualified admiration; but the following paragraph gives the ironic twist:

Young Georgy lorded over this soft and yielding nature: and the contrast of its simplicity and delicacy with the coarse pomposity of the dull old man with whom he next came into contact, made him lord it over the latter too. If he had been a prince royal he could not have been better brought up to think well of himself. (708)

The very goodness and submissiveness of his parent tends to develop aggressiveness and a sense of superiority in the child; and we are meant to contrast the kind lad Rawdon, the son of a selfish and neglectful mother, with the snobbish young Georgy, whom his mother's devotion has moulded in his father's obnoxious image.

Her love for her son, then, though it is real and enduring, damages his moral character. All that we hear of her relation with her daughter Janey is that she is jealous of her in her husband's affections.

It is on the saintly qualities of Helen Pendennis, the prototype of the mother in his novels, that Thackeray is most insistent of all. She, again, though she is a penniless dependent, is "as fine a lady as any in England," one of the kind of women "in whose angelical natures there is something awful, as well as beautiful, to contemplate; at whose feet the wildest and fiercest of us must fall down and humble ourselves, in admiration of that adorable purity which never seems to do or think wrong" (Pnd, 18). Such is the description of her at the outset. And after her death, and her long influence over the fortunes of her son, and all the scenes in which she has been seen in a light

that is far from saintly, we are still told that "Pendennis's mother was worshipped in his memory, and canonized there, as such a saint ought to be" (791). The effusions, in fact, are often embarrassing, when read in isolation. But they do not appear in isolation, and the voice of the narrator who tells us that she "ought" to be canonized in her son's memory is no more the authentic voice of the novel (though Thackeray himself in some moods might have claimed that it was) than the dry tones of the ironist that alternate with it. So after the introduction of her as one of the angelic kind, he goes on: "That even a woman should be faultless, however, is an arrangement not permitted by nature..." (18).

The one flaw in her character, he explains, is an exaggerated pride in her family, especially in her son, whose virtues, graces and talents she considers unsurpassed. Being offered her worship, Pen accepts it, as Georgy did Amelia's, as his due. And again the effect, as we are told explicitly at the outset, is detrimental to his moral character:

This unfortunate superstition and idol-worship of this good woman was the cause of a great deal of the misfortune which befell the young gentleman who is the hero of this history, and deserves therefore to be mentioned at the outset of his story. (19)

Laura, whose moral discrimination is much keener than Helen's, although she is not canonized in this novel, is able to see how bad Helen's worship has been for her son; how it has made him self-satisfied and selfish, supercilious and finally cynical; and one of the major themes of the novel deals with the process of Pen's recognition of that self which his mother has helped to build as his own worst enemy.

Helen has, also, the familiar shortcomings of the virtuous.

She lacks a sense of humour; and she is, as Amelia is not, unforgiving, and even ready, in a sexual matter at least, to believe Pen is more wicked than he is. Her whole behaviour when she thinks Pen has had an affair with the porter's daughter - her exaggerated sense of moral outrage and her gross injustice to Fanny - these are the sins that grow directly out of her goodness and love.

Thackeray vividly dramatizes, in individual scenes in the book, how Helen's goodness becomes exasperating in a way that only righteousness and love can be. Her eagerness to push Pen into Laura's arms is repulsive (it is not, like Mrs. Bennet's match-making, comic, but takes on rather the nature of procuring): she eagerly leaves them alone together, she wakes Pen early to send him out into the garden after Laura, and watches the scene from behind the window-curtains. Her love for her son has a suffocating quality about it:

[Her] wounded bosom yearned with love towards him, though there was a secret between them, and an anguish or rage almost on the mother's part, to think that she was dispossessed somehow of her son's heart, or that there were recesses in it which she must not or dared not enter. She sickened as she thought of the sacred days of boyhood when it had not been so - when her Arthur's heart had no secrets, and she was his all in all. (716)

This is the kind of absorbing and clinging love that makes its object want to tear and rend at its entanglements; and in fact immediately following this passage there is a repetition of the image for a woman's love as the "pretty fond parasite" that twines round the oak. There is that about certain kinds of tenderness and vulnerability that moves the irresistible impulse to be rough and to wound. This is what Thackeray can show with a clarity which his explicit moralizing sometimes seems to belie. Helen's death scene may appear an orgy of sentimentality; but it is as well to note the psychological realism of it:

Pen remarked that his mother's voice and her whole frame trembled, her hand was clammy cold as she put it up to his forehead, piteously embracing him. The spectacle of her misery only added, somehow, to the wrath and testiness of the young man. He scarcely returned the kiss which the suffering lady gave him: and the countenance with which he met the appeal of her look was hard and cruel. 'She persecutes me,' he thought within himself, 'and she comes to me with the air of a martyr.' 'You look very ill, my child,' she said. 'I don't like to see you look in that way.' And she tottered to a sofa, still holding one of his passive hands in her thin, cold, clinging fingers. (730)

The modern reader's gorge rises at Helen's lingering agonies and long-drawn-out prayers. But we should notice that Pen's gorge rises too, even if only momentarily: it is an indication that Thackeray knew what he was doing.

There is a tendency in casual criticism of Thackeray's work to notice two things - that he explicitly praises the goodness of such characters as Amelia and Helen, and that as characters they are exasperating; and to conclude from this that Thackeray has failed in what he set out to do. But Thackeray was in far greater control of his novels than this suggests. He is perfectly aware of the discrepancy; it is for him a discrepancy that exists in life. There is goodness in such characters as Amelia and Helen, and though it is a kind of goodness that is less appealing to us than to a Victorian, still we should make no mistake about the fact that they are safer people to be intimate with than the serpents like Becky and Blanche. At the same time, the demands that they make on those they love are of a nature to prompt a rebellion that can be the more cruel for being the less justified. This is what Thackeray is able to portray through his irony. Again a double focus conveys a moral and psychological complexity.

It is easier to see Thackeray's intention in his depiction of Rachel, Lady Castlewood, in Esmond, for here the explicitly limited

point of view of a narrator who is a character makes the reader expect some extent of dramatic irony. The view of her which Harry Esmond gives in the body of the novel contrasts with what we are told of her by her Virginian daughter in the preface, as well as with what we hear of her from other characters within the novel. Besides this, we have the further commentary provided on her years later by the aged Beatrix in another novel. Here the ironic framework is clear; but it is not essentially different from that in Vanity Fair and Pendennis, where a sentimental authorial commentary alternates with an ironical one.

Esmônd thinks Rachel a saint, and she is indeed humble, religious, selfless, and loving - sometimes. He himself can see some of her faults; but for the most part we can recognize his description as being partisan, and much of our information about her must be gained from the words of others. Esmond's account of the loss of love in her first marriage, for instance, suggests that it is Castlewood who has abandoned her - as she claims herself: that he first destroys her love by leaving her when she has the small-pox, by ceasing to love her when her beauty is impaired, and by taking a mistress. But Harry is ignorant that her adulterous love for him was probably the most decisive factor in the decay of the marriage, rather than her husband's loss of love for her. Castlewood confides to Harry that since the time of the small-pox "my wife's as cold as the statue at Charing Cross."

'I tell thee, she has no forgiveness in her, Henry. Her coldness blights my whole life, and sends me to the punch-bowl, or driving about the country.... I'm killed by the very virtue of that proud woman. Virtue! give me the virtue that can forgive; give me the virtue that thinks not of preserving itself, but of making other folks happy.' (HE, 128)

Rachel, like other "virtuous" women, takes a certain satisfaction

in her husband's misdemeanours - his drinking, his coarseness and stupidity, and his having a mistress; for it gives her some justification for the transfer of her love from him to Harry. The manifestation of her sense of intellectual and moral superiority to her husband drives him to a kind of despair:

'She neither sins nor forgives. I know her temper - and now I've lost her: by Heaven I love her ten thousand times more than ever I did.... I'm not good like her, I know it. Who is - by Heaven, who is? I tired and wearied her, I know that very well.... I felt she didn't belong to me: and the children don't. And I besotted myself, and gambled, and drank, and took to all sorts of devilries out of despair and fury.' (153)

Such is the saint as a wife, when she is married to the wrong person. As a mother she follows the usual pattern of loving mothers by being over-indulgent, especially to her son. This Esmond himself sees: "I am inclined to fancy, my mistress, who never said a harsh word to her children.... must have been too fond and pressing with the maternal authority: for her son and her daughter both revolted early" (351). She is also jealous - jealous of her son's love for others, and of others' love for her two daughters. And again, as with her husband, her very goodness drives Beatrix to wickedness. Esmond, contemplating the daughter's selfishness and ambition, considers "'Tis a marvel to think that her mother was the purest and simplest woman in the whole world, and that this girl should have been born from her" (351).

Thackeray, however, presents this as no marvel at all, but rather as the natural course of events. In Beatrix's weaker and more introspective moments, she can give another account of the effect of her mother's goodness on her: "Oh, how good she is Harry. ... Oh, what a saint she is! Her goodness frightens me. I think I'm not fit to live with her. I should be better, I think, if she were not so perfect" (355). The

self-righteousness and pride of the mother is inherited as selfishness and ambition by the daughter.

The ironic tension that we find in Esmond between Harry's fervent admiration for Rachel's moral rectitude and the knowledge, supplied in dialogue, in the preface, and between the lines of his account, of the psychological damage it can do when in operation is humorously expressed in the dry comments years later by the detached and worldly-wise old Beatrix in The Virginians. She speaks about Rachel to her grandson:

'My mother has always described hers as an angel upon earth,' interposed George.

'Eh! That is a common character for people after they are dead!' cried the baroness; 'and Rachel Castlewood was an angel, if you like - at least your grandfather thought so. But let me tell you, sir, that angels are sometimes not very commodes à vivre. It may be they are too good to live with us sinners, and the air down below here don't agree with them. My poor mother was so perfect that she never could forgive me for being otherwise. Ah, mon Dieu! how she used to oppress me with those angelical airs!'

George cast down his eyes, and thought of his own melancholy youth. (Vns, 560)

There is a mother in The Newcomes, a minor character, who seems to be there specifically to point a moral to over-moral mothers. Lady Walham, young Lord Kew's mother, again is invested with saintly qualities. She herself has lived a life of rigid purity, and has tried to impose her standards on her son - and she has signally failed. We meet Kew as a good-humoured prodigal, very like young Frank Castlewood in Esmond. We meet his mother when she comes to his bedside after he has been shot in a duel. It is an encounter that makes her examine her conduct to see how far she has been to blame, and she discovers in herself the vices which Thackeray shows as being the other side of the coin of virtue.

Very likely her mind was narrow; very likely the precautions which she had used in the lad's early days ... had served only to vex and weary

the young pupil, and to drive his high spirit to revolt. It is hard to convince a woman perfectly pure in her life and intentions, ready to die if need were for her own faith,... that she may be doing harm. (Nc, 485)

This mother does achieve self-knowledge, and an awareness of the harm she has caused, and she repents of the excess of morality that has driven her son to dissipation. It is she, and not the prodigal, who has most need to repent.

While she is debating her moral choice in her mind, the narrator, in preaching vein, considers "that battle betwixt Evil and Good." "Here, on one side, is Self and Ambition and Advancement; and Right and Love on the other. Which shall we let to triumph for ourselves - which for our children?" (502). The irony which Thackeray explores in The Newcomes and his other novels is that the parent who chooses the one is likely to determine her children's predilection for the other.

The most sympathetic of all Thackeray's good characters is a man, Colonel Newcome. He is less subject to attack as a creation because the writer is both more explicit about his faults and less insistent about his saintliness. He is a lovable character, like his heroes and literary forbears, Dr. Primrose, Sir Roger de Coverley and Don Quixote. But he follows the same pattern, in many ways, as the female parents. He is so morally upright that he cannot forgive any deviousness, and he damages his son's cause by his irascibility with Barnes in much the same way as Kent damages Lear's cause by his with Oswald. So we are told of the colonel's vindictiveness towards the other side of the Newcome family, "what is sheer hate seems to the individual entertaining the sentiment so like indignant virtue, that he often indulges in the propensity to the full, nay, lauds himself for the exercise of it" (838).

His love for Clive is not of the suffocating kind that prompts rebellion; it is rather so undemanding that he ties Clive to him with a net of obligations, and they influence him to choose for his father's sake rather than for his own. The colonel decides that art is an inferior occupation and Ethel not good enough for his son; and a combination of circumstance and grateful deference to his father makes Clive give up painting and marry Rosey instead. "Between his two best beloved mistresses, poor Clive's luckless father somehow interposes.... In place of Art the colonel brings him a ledger; and in lieu of first love, shows him Rosey" (851). The result for Clive is a dreary and frustrating existence, in a profession that bores him and with a wife who is little more than a doll. "With the best intentions in the world," he exclaims of his father, "what a slave's life it is that he has made for me!" (853).

Although the colonel is on the side of love and honour against the World and expediency, his eagerness for his son's happiness and prosperity makes him, by a kind of inversion, vicariously worldly. In the days of his prosperity, when he too is in the banking business and displaying at dreary soirées his grandiose lack of taste, he becomes pompous and almost snobbish; so that it takes his misery and the inevitable poverty which follows his ill-advised transactions in a world he knows nothing of, to restore our sympathy for him.

George Orwell, speaking of Agnes Wickfield in David Copperfield, calls her "the real legless angel of Victorian romance, almost as bad as Thackeray's Laura."⁹ Laura as she appears in Pendennis is pleasant enough, and her sense in contrast to Blanche's sham sensibility, and her shrewd judgement against Helen's tendency to hysteria, as well as

her sense of humour, make her a substantial character who is, if moral, still a tolerable heroine whom one can imagine Pendennis coming to love. It is the Laura who is the wife of the narrator in The Newcomes and Philip who is hard to take.

To call her a legless angel is an apt description, for in fact in these novels she is not a complete person. Thackeray to some extent indulges in allegory here, and Laura is an attitude rather than a character. It is noticeable that her existence is seldom expressed in action. There is a high-wrought scene, with even a suggestion of divine intervention, in which she acts as good angel in trying to deter Clara Newcome from leaving her husband and children to elope with her lover; but it has no effect, and the impression is that she was rather part of Clara's mind than an embodied person who can actually intervene.

She plays Sentiment to Pendennis's Cynicism; and in fact she has some shrewd things to say to a sceptical and detached Victorian gentleman of a society where a policy of laissez-faire could become an excuse for avoiding responsibility:

'You dare not have opinions, or holding them you dare not declare them, and act by them. You compromise with crime every day because you think it would be officious to declare yourself and interfere. You are not afraid of outraging morals, but of inflicting ennui upon society, and losing your popularity.... It is not right to "put your oar in," as you say in your jargon (and even your slang is a sort of cowardice, sir, for you are afraid to speak the feelings of your heart): - it is not right to meddle and speak the truth, not right to rescue a poor soul who is drowning - of course not.' (Ph, 174)

But although Thackeray can combine the two attitudes in his commentary, in trying to personify them here he has failed to make them interesting characters who belong in a realistic novel.

So far as Laura is realized as a character, she is morally sententious - she refuses to forgive Clara for her sin even before she

has committed it - and of course rather suffocatingly affectionate to her children. There is some ironic exposure of her, as we would expect. In a moment when she has been expressing her indignation at the worldly and grasping Twysdens, even her husband can suggest an inversion: "Regarding this blue-eyed mother and daughter, Mrs. Laura Pendennis was in such a state of mind, that she was ready to tear their blue eyes out" (Ph, 174).

When a critic complained about "the pragmatic assumption of her goodness" in the novel,¹⁰ Thackeray pointed out the assumption was the narrator's and not the author's, and proved rather Pen's uxoriousness than Laura's infallibility (Letters, III, 469).

Good characters are notoriously difficult to create in literature; the Satans and Becky Sharps, with their superior vitality, will always take the greatest share of the reader's interest. Because we are used to this, we are automatically distrustful and hypercritical of the characters that are presented as good. We resent being preached at explicitly. Helen Pendennis, or Esther Summerson, are types that make most readers immediately sheer off in disgust. But each case should be judged on its merits.

With Thackeray's good characters it is clear to an attentive reader that they are not in fact being presented as patterns to be imitated, for his portrayal of his "saints" is deeply ironic. He shows us good characters, but they are often the ones who bring about evil. In the first place he is fully aware that they are exasperating: their moral superiority and their self-righteousness can be infuriating and so bring out the worst in people who are living in a world whose claims are not reducible to simple moral alternatives; while their narrow-

mindfulness makes them sometimes foolish, and often lacking in a sense of humour. Secondly, he shows how his good characters are often mistaken in the application of their goodness - Helen and Laura unjustly condemn Fanny for a sin she has not committed, Colonel Newcome arranges his son's life in such a way as to make him useless and miserable. And this mistaken application of goodness finally works towards evil, as their unforgiving natures make them vindictive or their indulgence makes their children degenerate.

"I'm killed by the very virtue of that proud woman;" "I should be better, I think, if she were not so perfect;" "With the best intentions in the world, what a slave's life it is that he has made for me!" So speak a husband, a daughter, and a son of some of Thackeray's "angels." In his novels those who are well-meaning cast a blight on those they mean well by, and the goodness of the parents is inexorably visited on the children.

Many critics have found fault with Thackeray because he seems to say one thing about a character, while they discover for themselves other and contradictory things. But what they discover is only what Thackeray has shown them, and shown intentionally. If they find a character who is called an angel on one page behaving very much like a fallible or even vicious human being on another, it is because Thackeray means to present and maintain both evaluations. Certain qualities in certain characters have for him a sanctity which he is concerned to recognize and to acknowledge. They mean well, and after all this is preferable to meaning ill. But in a fallen world, as he constantly shows, good intentions can be perverted to the performance of evil, evil which reflects on the subject as it damages the object. No wonder

that in The Rose and the Ring (which, being a fairy tale, is the only one of Thackeray's stories that has a really happy ending) the Fairy Blackstick decides at the Christenings of the hero and heroine, "My poor child, the best thing I can send you is a little misfortune" (X, 326) - and the misfortune which is to be so good for them consists in their losing their parents in infancy, and being battered about in a selfish and loveless world until they have become good enough for each other!

"They love not poison that do poison need" - this could be the text for many of Thackeray's stories. One would certainly hesitate to wish Becky on anyone as a mother; yet it is clear that she would be wholesome medicine for Georgy Osborne. That is no reason to love Becky, but it can show us her value.

Thackeray may preach the doctrine of "the vanity of success, and of all but Love and Goodness" - but it comes in question whether, in a world of vanity, goodness is not vanity too. We may still consider it true that "Thackeray was on the side of the angels" - but it is impossible to be sure in his novels who the angels are.

IV

IRONY IN LOVE: AMBIVALENT RELATIONSHIPS

As a novelist of manners, Thackeray places his characters realistically in a self-seeking society with a complex and minutely graded system of subordination, the reversals and incongruities of which are the material for his irony. He can conceive of his characters, in his polite way, as animals, existing in an environment where survival of the fittest is the dominant principle.

As a moralist, Thackeray sees this setting as a context for moral choice; he presents his characters as moral beings and invites us to estimate how far, in the exigencies of a world where the issues are too intricate to admit of any single right alternative, they succeed in being good. In a study that is deliberately limited to a consideration of the characters so far as they are moral beings, we can see how his irony is concerned with the ambiguities of the double face of good and evil.

But his characters, of course, exist at a level that is deeper than either of these. They are psychological beings as well, with motives that cannot be fully explained by social or moral aspirations, though they may be influenced by them; and it is at this level that characters like, say, Rachel Esmond are most interesting to us. There is always a pivotal emotional situation in Thackeray's novels which, though it may be the result of the social environment, and part of a moral issue, cannot be resolved by a sermon or by any number of pounds, shillings and pence. This is the psychological centre of his novels, and to a large extent it is what gives them their stature. If

we think of Thackeray's books merely as social surveys, perhaps Leavis's estimation of him - not intended to be complimentary - as merely "a greater Trollope" would not be unjust, for we might well feel that his work lacked "the essential substance of interest" that we expect of a novel.¹ But it is in these central situations that this substance of interest surely consists.

Here, where he is depicting a character not just as a fragment of society, but as a complete individual with subconscious as well as conscious motivation, Thackeray is still an ironist, in that he is constantly though unobtrusively illuminating the contrast between the two levels. As he is concerned to expose the ulterior mercenary motive when he talks of the pious humbug of a material society, so he shows his characters rationalizing in social terms the drives that have a deeper origin. Mrs. Baynes turns against Philip as a suitor for her daughter ostensibly because he has insufficient money and social standing; but also because her tenderness for him has been thwarted. Barry Lyndon sets about catching a rich wife in order to achieve an easy berth in life, and then takes a savage pleasure in subjecting her to his tyrannous will and perversely squandering the fortune. Helen Pendennis is a conscientious mother who earnestly wishes the best for her son; but there is a sexual element in her passionate fondness for him that makes her neurotically resist all his attachments to other women. This co-existence of contrary emotions in the human psyche is further material for Thackeray's irony.

To convey all this he makes use of a kind of psychological understatement. He does not attempt to analyse fully for us his characters' internal workings in the manner of George Eliot; what we

know of his characters we must gather from their speech and gesture rather than from any extended analysis of them. But if he tells us little of what is beneath the surface, this does not indicate shallowness, and he shows us enough to allow us to estimate for ourselves what is in the depths. He is always suggesting that there is more going on than meets the eye: it is the method of the ironist. With a vivid economy he can evoke, in an image or an apparently insignificant little scene, in a word, or a kiss, or a blush, the ambiguities that underlie every intimate relationship.

The conflict of conscious and unconscious motives is a strong force in all Thackeray's work. With a high degree of consciousness he depicts relationships of a kind not explicitly discussed until the advent of modern psychoanalytical techniques. His novels are to a surprising degree amenable to Freudian interpretation.

I proceed with such an interpretation with the preliminary qualification that it is not intended to represent the whole truth. I do not mean to suggest that Thackeray's characters are all "really" Oedipuses and Electras in disguise; but only that they are not fully defined by their social roles: and that Thackeray was employed in ironically contrasting and relating the two levels of motivation. An examination of the complexities of his characters in their intimate relationships is useful in itself, for it refutes a standard view, expressed even by as perceptive a critic as Edmund Wilson, that Thackeray "is unable to interest himself in personalities or relations for their own sake."² But it is also relevant to my subject of irony, as I have shown; for as Trilling points out, "the whole notion of a rich ambiguity in literature, of the interplay between the apparent meaning and the latent ...

has been reinforced by Freudian concepts."³

What Thackeray shows most frequently is the ambivalence in the relationships between the different generations, and the unconscious sexual element in the love of the mother for her son and the son for his mother. So, with the son as the focal point, he frequently shows mothers jealous of their son's affections, and fathers who are their sons' sexual rivals. Thackeray would be the last person to decry parental love: and yet he is quite aware of the Oedipal nature of the situations he depicts. Speaking of Helen Pendennis's "anxiety with which brooding women watch over their sons' affections," he says, "I have no doubt there is a sexual jealousy on the mother's part, and a secret pang" (Pnd, 298).

These concerns were close to home for Thackeray, an integral part of his own experience, as his letters show. He made no secret of the fact that Helen Pendennis was a portrait of his mother, and in 1852 he wrote of her:

It gives the keenest tortures of jealousy and disappointed yearning to my dearest old mother (who's as beautiful now as ever) that she can't be all in all to me, mother sister wife everything but it mayn't be - There's hardly a subject on wh. we don't differ. And she lives away at Paris with her husband a noble simple old gentleman who loves nothing but her in the world, and a jealousy after me tears and rends her. Eh! who is happy? When I was a boy at Larkbeare, I thought her an Angel and worshipped her. I see but a woman now, O so tender so loving so cruel. My daughter Anny says O how like Granny is to Mrs. Pendennis Papa - and Granny is mighty angry that I should think no better of her than that. (Letters, III, 13)

This gives some indication of the extent of Thackeray's awareness of the implications of the ambivalent relationships he depicts.

The same pattern of jealousy between parent and child emerges, though not so persistently, in the relationship of father to daughter, where the daughter may devote herself to the father to the exclusion of a

lover, or become, like Beatrix, a rival of her mother. General Lambert, who is presented as a model husband and father, admits jocularly, "We men don't wish to part with [our daughters] . I am sure, for my part, I should not like yonder young fellow half as well if I thought he intended to carry one of my darlings away with him" (Vns, 219). But this is more than a joke, for his daughter Hetty, out of devotion to him, does remain a childless old maid.

The central emotional relationships in the novels repeatedly take the form of a triangle of which parent and child, either as lovers or as sexual rivals, are two of the corners. Such a situation in a Victorian novel must necessarily be suggested rather than analysed in detail. But it was perennially interesting to Thackeray: the love of two people of marriageable age, which he is so often ready to dismiss as just another instance of the same old inevitable attraction, becomes tense and absorbing when seen in relation to the love and demands of the parents' generation.

Before we consider the ironic tensions of these triangle relationships in the different novels, it is worth studying separately one particular form which depends on the ambiguities of the mother-daughter relationship: that of the mother, daughter, and daughter's lover. It is in many ways the one most clearly seen from the outside, for Thackeray's definitely male point of view gave him the most objective vision of the other two corners of the triangle in which two women are in love with the same man.

This is the recurring pattern. The bond between mother and daughter is seen as being so close that they seem like twins, and their looks, their reactions, and apparently their interests, are identical.

But this very identity of interest must turn to enmity when a suitor enters the picture; for in the nature of things he can take only one half of the composite being that is mother and daughter, though he may want with some part of himself to take both, and may vacillate between them: Henry Esmond's vacillation lasts for ten years, during which he tries to make Rachel his mother-in-law before he finally makes her his wife instead. Generally, however, the suitor takes the daughter; and though for a while the mother can live through her daughter and so carry on a vicarious love affair, eventually she finds that her daughter is no longer an extension of herself, but her rival instead, and usually the successful rival at that. The mother is excluded from the tender relationship; and her reaction is to swing to the opposite extreme of hostility: to become, in fact, one of the savage mothers-in-law that Thackeray so often depicted.

Mother and daughter are frequently presented as a single composite image, entwined and 'wrapped up in one another.' They are the "mater pulcra, filia pulcrior," as Rachel and Beatrix are called in Esmond; and Rachel says of her daughter, "We are like sisters, and she the eldest sister, somehow." In the early stages of the presentation of Rosey and Mrs. Mackenzie in The Newcomes we see them devoted: "More caresses follow. Mamma is in a rapture. How pretty they look - the mother and daughter - two lilies twining together" (287). The passage is ironic, for we know that Mrs. Mackenzie is far from caressing when not in company. Again, when we hear that Charlotte Baynes is "blooming like a rose,... the very image of her mother," the narrator comments drily, "In this case poor Charlotte must have looked like a yellow rose, for Mrs. Baynes was of a bilious temperament and complexion" (Ph, 290).

Laura and her foster mother Helen are also to some extent identified, and again floral imagery connects them: when Pen sees Laura giving Helen a rose "the image of the two women remained for ever after in his mind" (Pnd, 299). An early instance of this identification of mother and daughter occurs in "The Ravenswing," where Mrs. Crump and her daughter meet the fascinating Walker at the hairdresser's:

[Mr. Walker] looked round at the ladies with such a fascinating grace, that both ... blushed and giggled, and were quite pleased. Mamma looked at 'Gina, and 'Gina looked at mamma; and then mamma gave 'Gina a little blow in the region of her little waist, and then both burst out laughing,... and both fixed their large shining black eyes repeatedly on Mr. Walker.

'He can't stay,' said Mrs. Crump, all of a sudden, blushing as red as a peony.

'I shall have on my peignoir, mamma,' said miss, looking at the gentleman, and then dropping down her eyes and blushing too. (IV, 355)

Mother and daughter (peonies this time) both blush for the same man; the mother remains good-humoured, even if the lover pays most attention to the daughter, for to some extent she lives through her daughter. So in the same scene, when Morgiana lets down her beautiful black hair, her main sexual attraction, and Walker is rapt in admiration, Mrs. Crump is able to "make her daughter's triumph her own."

'Heigho! when I acted at the Wells in 1820, before that dear girl was born, I had such a head of hair as that, to a shade, sir, to a shade. They called me Ravenswing on account of it. I lost my head of hair when that dear child was born, and I often say to her, "Morgiana, you came into the world to rob your mother of her 'air.'" (IV, 356)

If we take into account the symbolism of this passage, we can see that mother and daughter are potential sexual rivals (we remember that Rachel Esmond lost her hair in the small-pox epidemic which Beatrix escaped). While the identification of mother and daughter lasts, the mother can have her own satisfaction in a love that is lived vicariously through her daughter. "I live for my darling girls now," says Mrs. Mackenzie

(Nc, 286). This is why mothers are such avid match-makers for their daughters. We find Mrs. Baynes is effusive in promoting the engagement of Philip with Charlotte, and Mrs. Mackenzie is particularly animated when she is trying to catch Clive as a husband for Rosey:

Clive laughed and joked and waltzed alternately with Rosey and her mamma. The latter was the briskest partner of the two. (Nc, 284).

Again, "what is this burning desire all you women have for selling and marrying your daughters?" asks General Lambert in bewilderment (Vns, 219). The answer is in the same novel:

No woman was ever averse to the idea of her daughter getting a husband, however fathers revolt against the invasion of the son-in-law. As for mothers and grandmothers, those good folks are married over again in the marriage of their young ones; and their souls attire themselves in the laces and muslins of twenty - forty years ago. (Vns, 339)

It is plain enough that Mrs. Lambert, in promoting the match between her daughter and George Warrington, is herself in love with him to some extent. She is irritated to be reminded of her age by her daughters, she pampers George, and the two become quite sentimental over each other. George recollects this with surprise: "Strange infatuation of passion - singular perversity of reason! At some period before his marriage, it not infrequently happens that a man actually is fond of his mother-in-law!" (Vns, 706). So Philip's allegiance is temporarily with Mrs. Baynes against even his friend and mentor Pendennis (Ph, 239); and Clive half-jocularly admits of Mrs. Mackenzie, "I thought her delightful for three days, I declare I was in love with her" (Nc, 315).

But eventually there comes a rude awakening for the mother, when she finds that her daughter has the lover's whole allegiance, and that he has forgotten his sentimental attachment to the mother, and may even actively dislike her. Her reaction is a violent change from tenderness to hostility. This is the evolution of Thackeray's termagant mothers-in-law. It is impossible to read much of his fiction without

noticing the recurrence of this figure: Mrs. Shum in The Yellowplush Papers, Mrs. Gam in "Dennis Haggarty's Wife," Mrs. Crump in "The Ravenswing;" then, in the major novels, Mrs. Mackenzie, the most appalling dragon of them all, in The Newcomes, Lady Baker in Lovel the Widower, and finally Mrs. Baynes in Philip. Lambert Ennis says that Thackeray presents the mother-in-law as a principle of evil as he presents the mother as a principle of good.⁴ The usual critical explanation is to point out that Thackeray had a Tartar of a mother-in-law himself, and to leave it at that. But we should notice that Thackeray, though he asserts often enough that "every man naturally will, must, and should dislike his mother-in-law" (IV, 398), presents this figure as the final stage in a process of development. There is a carefully conceived psychological basis for the metamorphosis of the charming Mrs. Mackenzie into the terrible Campaigner of the final chapters of The Newcomes, as there is for the change of Mrs. Baynes from the match-maker to the matchbreaker in Philip.

When Mrs. Baynes, out of vindictiveness against Philip, breaks off the engagement between him and her daughter Charlotte, she makes Charlotte ill and miserable. Her sister, Mrs. MacWhirter, is indignant at the breach of faith, and she is shrewd enough to penetrate the mother's motivation:

'Of course, as a feeling mother, I feel that poor Charlotte is unhappy, my dear.'

'But what makes her so, my dear?' cries Mrs. MacWhirter, who presently showed that she was mistress of the whole controversy. 'No wonder Charlotte is unhappy, dear love! Can a girl be engaged to a young man, a clever, accomplished, highly educated young man - '

'What?' cries Mrs. Baynes.

'Haven't I your letters? I have them all in my desk. They are in that hall now. Didn't you tell me so over and over again; and rave about him, till I thought you were in love with him yourself almost?' cries Mrs. Mac.

'A most indecent observation!' cries out Eliza Baynes, in her deep, awful voice. (Ph, 399)

Thackeray usually offers a social motive as well for this change

in the daughter's mother. So Mrs. Baynes says she wants a better financial match for Charlotte than the out-at-elbow Philip, and Mrs. Mackenzie shows at her worst when Colonel Newcome has lost her money. But the sexual motive of thwarted tenderness for the son-in-law is undoubtedly present too, and is perhaps the more genuine.

Freud describes just this process in the relationship of mother, daughter and son-in-law when discussing the impulse towards incest and its suppression:

The emotional relations between son-in-law and mother-in-law are controlled by components which stand in sharp contrast to each other. I mean that the relation is really "ambivalent"; that is, it is composed of conflicting feelings of tenderness and hostility....

The aging mother protects herself against [the monotony in the wife's emotional life] by living through the lives of her children, by identifying with them and making their emotional experiences her own.... The emotional identification with the daughter may easily go so far with the mother that she also falls in love with the man her daughter loves.... The tendency to such infatuation is very frequent with the mother-in-law, and either this infatuation itself or the tendency opposed to it joins the conflict of contending forces in the psyche of the mother-in-law. Very often it is just this harsh and sadistic component of the love emotion which is turned against the son-in-law in order better to suppress the forbidden tender feelings.⁵

"Ah fond mother of fair daughters!" Mr. Batchelor moralizes in Lovel the Widower, "how strange thy passion is to add to thy titles that of mother-in-law! I am told, when you have got the title, it is often but a bitterness and a disappointment" (Lov, 90).

In the Electra of Sophocles, we are shown three roles of the daughter in the children of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. Iphigenia is the father's victim, and has the mother's allegiance; Chrysothemis is ready to forget her father and to become an extension of her mother's will; and Electra is devoted to her father, to the extent of being her mother's mortal enemy. But Electra too is her father's victim, inasmuch as she wastes her life in devotion to him.

Thackeray shows the daughter in all three of these roles. Mr. Osborne, the tyrannical father who marries one of his daughters to a

rich stuffed shirt and keeps the other at home to minister to him until she becomes an embittered spinster, has good reason to decorate his drawing-room with a clock "surmounted by a cheerful brass group of the sacrifice of Iphigenia" (VF, 149). General Lambert, for all his loving kindness, extorts the same sacrifice from Hetty, and General Baynes almost does the same with Charlotte. The mothers live through their daughters while they can; then they turn vindictive when they are excluded. But the element of rivalry between mother and daughter is potentially present from the first: Mrs. Crump loses her beautiful hair when her daughter is born; and in Thackeray's last work, the unfinished Denis Duval, the mad Countess de Saverne, like a Clytemnestra turning the tables on Electra, tries to drown her baby daughter.

The rivalry is not only for the daughter's lover but for the husband and father as well. Mrs. Baynes is at last a pathetic figure, for she is cast off not only by Charlotte and Philip, but by General Baynes too, who changes his allegiance from his wife to his daughter. In a powerful passage, a long remorseful self-examination by General Baynes while he lies sleepless in bed beside his wife, we are shown how he at last realizes that at her instigation he has made an Iphigenia of his daughter:

You stab her to the heart, and break your plighted honour to your child. 'And it is yonder cruel, shrivelled, bilious, plain old woman who makes me do all this, and trample on my darling, and torture her!' he thinks. (Ph, 410)

After this realization, he turns from his wife to cleave to his daughter.

This intricate set of interlocking triangles - father between wife and daughter, mother between husband and son-in-law, and daughter between father and lover - this is the emotional core of Philip, which

among all Thackeray's novels has the balance of interest weighted most heavily on the psychological relationships between the characters rather than on the hero's progress through society.

The mother-daughter-lover triangle is only one of the various possibilities of allegiances and rivalries between the generations that Thackeray explores. Such ironically ambivalent relationships are not only the focus of emotional interest in the novels, but their recurrence and variation constitute a structural pattern which often takes the place of a formal plot. To demonstrate this it is necessary to examine these patterns as they occur in the separate novels.

Barry Lyndon

Barry Lyndon is to a great extent a picaresque novel in which Barry goes through many adventures, and travels in various capacities to several countries. But at the beginning and at the end the focus of interest is on a particular set of relationships rather than on what the protagonist does or sees in the world.

We are told in detail of Barry's first love, and of his marriage; and both involve him in a triangle situation. Like nearly all Thackeray's young men, he first falls in love with a woman older than himself (eight years is the usual age difference: "She is eight years older than you - that follows, of course" [20], says Barry). She is his cousin Nora; and what follows just as automatically is that his mother is at once jealous of her. She abuses Nora as being fat, freckled and red-haired (22). Then when Barry is ill, and will take nothing but from Nora's hand, she becomes the pathetic figure of the

rejected beloved:

[I] would look rudely and sulkily upon the good mother, who loved me better than anything else in the world, and gave up even her favourite habits, and proper and becoming jealousies, to make me happy.... She must have been very sad, that poor mother of mine - Heaven be good to her! - at that period of my life; and has often told me since what a pang of the heart it was to her to see all her care and affection of years forgotten by me in a minute, and for the sake of a little, heartless jilt. (28)

Nora herself drives Barry wild with jealousy by treating him 'sometimes as a child, sometimes as a man.' The situation is one that Thackeray portrays more than once, and with sympathy: that where the hero is off with the old mother and on with the new mother-surrogate.

At the other end of the novel is Barry's marriage with the widow, Lady Lyndon. Barry has by now developed from the almost sympathetic young scapegrace to the dyed-in-the-wool villain. But at the same time there is a startling psychological realism about his relation with the woman he marries, and a convincing exploration, in the study of her feelings for him, of the ambivalence of human emotion.

He woos her as peremptorily as Gloucester woos Lady Anne, and he knows that the more she is afraid of him, the more likely he is to win her. "Terror, be sure of that, is not a bad ingredient of love" (BL, 218) he says, and he knows he is prospering in his suit when "the widow was growing dreadfully afraid of me, calling me her bête noir, her dark spirit, her murderous adorer" (219).

'Can this monster,' she wrote, 'indeed do as he boasts, and bend even Fate to his will? - can he make me marry him though I cordially detest him, and bring me a slave to his feet? The horrid look of his black serpent-like eyes fascinates and frightens me; it seems to follow me everywhere, and even when I close my own eyes, the dreadful gaze penetrates the lids, and is still upon me.' (220)

"When a woman begins to talk of a man in this way," Barry comments drily, "he is an ass who does not win her;" and of course he does win

her, and proceeds to play Bluebeard to her Fatima. Lady Lyndon is fat and unromantic, and to some extent a figure of fun - though it is macabre fun at best. But she is more interesting as a psychological study in masochism: for there is a subtle insight in the depiction of her adoration of Barry in spite of, or because of, his brutal treatment:

My Lady Lyndon's relation with me was a singular one. Her life was passed in a crack-brained sort of alternation between love and hatred for me. If I was in a good humour with her (as occurred sometimes), there was nothing she would not do to propitiate me further, and she would be as absurd and violent in her expressions of fondness as, at other moments, she would be in her demonstrations of hatred.... I had got my lady into such a terror about me that when I smiled it was quite an era of happiness to her; and, if I beckoned to her, she would come fawning up to me like a dog.... I brought my high-born wife to kiss my hand, to pull off my boots, to fetch and carry for me like a servant. (299)

So Thackeray explores the combination of love and hatred, and of attraction and fear, and its result in a definite masochism.

Lady Lyndon has a young son, Lord Bullingdon, who from the first is Barry's enemy. At the wedding, "when called upon by the Countess to embrace his papa, [he] shook his fist in my face, and said, 'He my father!'" (233). He might well have added, "A little more than kin, and less than kind," for there is a strong parallel here with the Hamlet situation. Step-father and step-son are immediate rivals and hate each other. Barry would like to disinherit Bullingdon, who is his father's heir: "The insubordination of that boy was dreadful. He used to quote passages of Hamlet to his mother, which made her very angry. Once when I took a horsewhip to chastise him, he drew a knife, and would have stabbed me" (240). Barry reveals his feelings in one of his characteristic attempts at self-justification:

For the first three years I never struck my wife but when I was in liquor.

When I flung the carving-knife at Bullingdon I was drunk, as everybody can testify; but as for having any systematic scheme against the poor lad, I can solemnly declare that, beyond merely hating him (and one's inclinations are beyond one's power) I am guilty of no evil towards him. (252)

The Hamlet parallel is maintained, though not explicitly, in Bullingdon's scholarly habits, and in the love the common people bear him. It certainly seems that Thackeray was aware of the Oedipal situation which, as pointed out by Freud and analyzed by Ernest Jones,⁶ is implicit in the play, though of course one hardly needs Freud to see what Shakespeare made clear enough. There is a scene in which Bullingdon knocks over the drunken and wife-beating Barry, and "catching his fainting mother in his arms, took her into his own room, where he, upon her entreaty, swore he would never leave the house as long as she continued united with me" (268). Like Claudius, Barry plots to send his step-son abroad on a fatal mission, but Bullingdon manages to frustrate the attempt, and finally returns to castigate the already dethroned step-father.

Lady Lyndon is certainly no Gertrude; but her ambivalent feelings for Barry and her divided allegiance between her husband and her son make her part of the novel that which holds our interest. And Barry's career takes the shape of a development from the son who is adored by his mother to the father figure who is the deadly enemy of the son.

Vanity Fair

Dorothy Van Ghent, in a perceptive passage of her study of the novel, has pointed out the importance of the theme of the fathers in Vanity Fair.⁷ The tyrannous Osborne and his household of frightened females, the mild and ineffective Sedley, old Sir Pitt Crawley and the



"The old man fell down on his knees and leered at her like a satyr." Sir Pitt Crawley proposes to Becky.
Vanity Fair, 178.

cynical Lord Steyne are the father figures. The fatherless heroine, Becky, is twice involved in a triangle situation between her husband and an older man, at the beginning and the end of her career. The first time she is actually wooed by father and son, Sir Pitt and Rawdon Crawley. When she is obliged to refuse the old man's proposal because she is already married to his son, she weeps "some of the most genuine tears that ever fell from her eyes" (178). "I might have been somebody's mamma, instead of - " she writes to Rawdon, suggesting all the psychological complexity of the situation (187). Sir Pitt is disappointed but good-humoured and even amused when he hears she must reject his proposal because she is married already; but when he knows the identity of his rival he is enraged:

When Sir Pitt Crawley heard that Rebecca was married to his son, he broke out into a fury of language, which it would do no good to repeat in this place.... We will shut the door upon the figure of the frenzied old man, wild with hatred and insane with baffled desire. (199)

Juxtaposed with this scene is one which shows the husband and wife in their "snug little Brompton lodgings," with Becky decked out in all the finery which Rawdon has bought her "with the profusion of blind love and unbounded credit." Rawdon is uneasy that Miss Crawley, their only source of income, will be permanently offended at the marriage:

'Suppose the old lady doesn't come to,' Rawdon said to his little wife,... 'Suppose she don't come round, eh, Becky?'

'I'll make your fortune,' she said; and Delilah patted Samson's cheek.

'You can do anything,' he said, kissing the little hand. (199)

This passage looks forward to the great scene at the other end of Becky's career, where Samson is to escape from Delilah's trap to find she has betrayed him, before he lapses into impotence and is condemned

to grind at the mill in Coventry Island. Lord Steyne, another titled father figure who is at Becky's feet, recalls Sir Pitt, the other of her old lovers thwarted by Rawdon.

He had her hand in his, and was bowing over it to kiss it, when Becky started up with a faint scream as she caught sight of Rawdon's white face. At the next instant she tried to smile, a horrid smile, as if to welcome her husband: and Steyne rose up, grinding his teeth, pale, and with fury in his looks.

He, too, attempted a laugh - and came forward holding out his hand. 'What, come back! How d'ye do, Crawley?' he said, the nerves of his mouth twitching as he tried to grin at the intruder. (675)

There are obvious similarities between the two old aspirants to Becky's affections, including even their appearance - both are stocky in build and both are bald - which emphasize the repetition of this father-woman-son triangle.

There is also a theme of the mothers in Vanity Fair which is almost as pervasive as that of the fathers. This is connected mainly with Amelia's part of the story, while the fathers have most to do with Becky's. Amelia's mother, Mrs. Sedley, follows the pattern of Thackeray's other mothers in being eager to marry off her daughter but indignant at the thought of her son's marriage. "Nothing is more keen, nor more common, nor more justifiable, than maternal jealousy," (37), the narrator tells us, with unobtrusive irony. (Is the maternal jealousy "justifiable" in that it is right and proper? or in that the son always gives ample provocation? or is it "justifiable" at all?).

He is referring to Mrs. Sedley's anger at the idea of Jos marrying Becky, which emerges in a little colloquy between Jos's parents:

'Here is Emmy's little friend making love to him as hard as she can; that's quite clear; and if she does not catch him some other will. That man is destined to be a prey to woman....'

'She shall go off tomorrow, the little artful creature,' said Mrs. Sedley, with great energy.

"Why not she as well as another, Mrs. Sedley? The girl's a white face at any rate. I don't care who marries him. Let Joe please himself.' (36)

The parents' positions are reversed when it comes to Amelia's marriage. In helping Amelia to buy her trousseau "Mrs. Sedley was herself again almost, and sincerely happy for the first time since their misfortunes" (322). But Mr. Sedley's reaction, when he hears that George will after all condescend to marry a bankrupt's daughter, is savage: "I won't have his name mentioned in my house. I curse the day that ever I let him into it; and I'd rather see my daughter dead at my feet than married to him" (243).

During the time of Amelia's early widowhood, when she is living with her parents in reduced circumstances, her allegiance is always to her father, and she is estranged from her mother. We hear of Mrs. Sedley that "the bitterness of poverty has poisoned the life of that once cheerful and kindly woman" (621): but it is not only poverty that embitters Mrs. Sedley, as it is not only poverty that turns the "once cheerful" Mrs. Mackenzie into a cruel tyrant in The Newcomes. The primal rivalry between mother and daughter, which is so absorbing a theme for Thackeray, is at work as well.

It is only for her father's sake that Amelia can make up her mind to part with Georgy to his grandfather Osborne, so as to save her family from their increasing hardship. The decision becomes necessary when old Sedley confesses that he has muddled away Jos's annuity, their last source of income:

'Ah,' said he, with quivering lips and turning away, 'you despise your old father now.'

'Oh, papa! it is not that,' Amelia cried out, falling on his neck, and kissing him many times. 'You are always good and kind. You did

it for the best. It is not for the money - it is - O my God! my God! have mercy upon me, and give me strength to bear this trial;' and she kissed him again wildly, and went away. (624)

Amelia as a mother devotes herself to Georgy as she had devoted herself to George. She in fact almost makes a husband of Georgy, and constantly sees him as the image of his father.⁸ Now, after she has deserted the father for the husband, she finds she must sacrifice the son for the father. The roles of father, husband and son are strangely interchangeable, and each has to substitute for the other in Amelia's love.

The time span of Vanity Fair allows history to repeat itself in the generations; and the father-daughter, mother-son pattern of the Sedley family is lived again in the quadrangle of Dobbin's family. The final image of the novel shows the structure of the Dobbin family as they retreat from Becky's baleful presence:

Emmy scurrying off on the arm of George (now grown a dashing young gentleman), and the colonel seizing up his little Janey, of whom he is fonder than of anything in the world - fonder even than of his History of the Punjaub.

'Fonder that he is of me,' Emmy thinks, with a sigh. (877)

So there is a cyclical pattern for Amelia as for Becky, and the repeating pattern of sexual and family relationships is part of the structure of the novel.

Pendennis

The pattern of parent and child relationships, which is an underlying theme in Vanity Fair, is in the foreground of Pendennis.

Pen's story is to a large extent the history of his loves; and each relation he has with a woman turns into a three-cornered one in which his mother plays the most significant part.

We hear only in summary of Helen Pendennis's youth and Arthur's

childhood. She had fallen in love with a young man who was already engaged to another woman. The brief love of the two was broken off, and he fulfilled his engagement; but Helen later becomes the guardian of her early lover's daughter, and so in a sense the mother of his child. After this unhappy love she consents to marry the elderly apothecary-turned-gentleman, John Pendennis. She comes to worship this fatherly figure; but she also adores her boy Arthur. The mother and son are in the habit of taking sunset walks together which "generally ended in a profusion of filial and maternal embraces" (Pnd, 13). We hear that John Pendennis takes care to be otherwise occupied during "this sunset business:" "It is probable that he did not much care for the view in front of his lawn window, or take any share in the poetry and caresses which were taking place there" (14). It is an apparently casual touch, and we are to hear little more of John Pendennis except for the news of his death; but the situation of the son's love for his mother and rivalry with his father has been set up deliberately. And when the father dies, we are prepared for what is, in a realistic Victorian novel, a very un-pious filial reaction:

As for Arthur Pendennis, after that awful shock which the sight of his dead father must have produced on him, and the pity and feeling which such an event no doubt occasioned [there is no point in those phrases "must have" and "no doubt" unless they are ironic], I am not sure that in the very moment of the grief, and as he embraced his mother and tenderly consoled her, and promised to love her forever, there was not springing up in his breast a sort of secret triumph and exultation. He was the chief now and lord. (25)

So we are prepared for the series of Pen's loves where his mother's attitude is always to have some effect on his own. His first love, Emily Costigan, or "the Fotheringay," is an obvious mother-surrogate. Of course she is eight years older than he is; and she is placid, serene, and beautiful. In this first love Pen's emotions are

fully and ardently engaged, but his mother's feelings about the match are from the first of primary importance to the principals:

'Does your mother know of this, Arthur?' said Miss Fotheringay slowly. He seized her hand madly and kissed it a thousand times. She did not withdraw it.... 'Calm yourself, dear Arthur,' she said, in her low rich voice, and smiled sweetly and gravely upon him. Then with her disengaged hand, she put the hair lightly off his throbbing forehead. He was in such a rapture and whirl of happiness that he could hardly speak. At last he gasped out, 'My mother has seen you and admires you beyond measure. She will learn to love you soon: who can do otherwise? She will love you because I do.' (78)

It seems strange that Helen is not as jealous of this first ardent love of Pen's as she is of his later and comparatively mild ones. One reason is perhaps that she does not feel deeply threatened by Emily Costigan in that she gives little indication of requiting Pen's passion. His marriage to this woman, then, would not exclusively absorb his love, and there would still be room for a deep relationship with his mother. But it is also possible that Helen realizes to some extent that this passionate attachment to an older woman is an outlet for his unconscious feelings for her. There is a passage in which she goes to him in his bed, when he is sleeplessly composing poems for Emily:

All the love-songs he had ever read, were working and seething in this young gentleman's mind, and he was at the very height and paroxysm of the imaginative frenzy, when his mother found him.

'Arthur,' said the mother's soft silver voice [not "Helen" or even "his mother," but "the mother"]: and he started up and turned round. He clutched some of the papers and pushed them under the pillow.

'Why don't you go to sleep, my dear?' she said, with a sweet tender smile, and sat down on the bed and took one of his hot hands.

Pen looked at her wildly for an instant. 'I couldn't sleep,' he said - 'I - I was - I was writing.' - And hereupon he flung his arms round her neck and said, 'Oh, mother, I love her, I love her!' (88)

Thackeray's illustration for this passage shows Pen embracing his mother in bed. To a determined Freudian, the crescent moon beyond the window bars and the overturned chair, symbols of the mother and father, might



(P) (P)
(Pen) (Pen)

"Oh, mother, I love her, I love her!" Arthur and Helen Pendennis.
Pendennis, 88.

suggest Pen's Oedipal impulse, for Thackeray frequently includes allegories in his illustrations. There is no need to labour the point: but the Oedipus pattern is undoubtedly present in the rest of the book.

The pattern is developed in another parallel with Hamlet. Here the parallel emphasizes Hamlet's relation to his mother rather than to his father, as in Barry Lyndon; and it is fully explicit, and elaborated in various incidents. Emily Costigan plays the part of Ophelia in the play at Chatteris, and during the play within the play, "as Hamlet lay at Ophelia's knee, Pen felt he would have liked to strangle [the actor] Mr. Hornbull." (75) And when Pen defends his love to his mother, he speaks to her "with a soothing, protecting air, like Hamlet with Gertrude in the play" (80). There is also a parody of the graveyard scene in which one of a group of factory youths gathered in the churchyard "began repeating Hamlet's verses over Ophelia, with a hideous leer at Pen;" and Pen is sufficiently provoked that he "knocked the bewildered young ruffian into the grave which was just waiting for a different lodger" (173). Much later in the book, too, and in reference to Pen's political position, he disclaims Hamlet's responsibility: "If the time is out of joint, have I any calling or strength to set it right?" Again Jones's interpretation of Hamlet seems relevant to an interpretation of Thackeray's novel.

While Pen is attached to the mature Emily, Helen has attracted the love of the young curate, Pen's tutor. "Poor dear Mrs. Pendennis might be his mother almost," we hear in a passage which Thackeray cut in later editions (988). Smirke is a comic figure, destined to

spend his time languishing in love and falling off his horse, and he is not taken seriously as a possible step-father for Pen. But he does bear a significant relation to Pen's story. For a short while, when the affair with Emily has been broken off and Pen is nursing a broken heart, there is a very tender relationship between the two young men, Helen's son and her lover. In another subsequently excised passage, there is even a suggestion of a brief homosexual attachment on Pen's part: he plies Smirke with presents, and his "affection gushed out in a multitude of sonnets to the friend of his heart" (986). The relationship is tender only while Pen does not know of Smirke's pretensions to his mother. There is a scene in which, over several bottles of claret, the curate works up the resolution to confess them:

'For two years my heart has been filled by one image, and has known no other idol. Haven't I loved you as a son, Arthur? - say, hasn't Charles Smirke loved you as a son?'

'Yes, old boy, you've been very good to me,' Pen said, whose liking, however, for his tutor was not by any means of the filial kind....

'Arthur, Arthur!' exclaimed the other wildly. 'You say I am your dearest friend - let me be more. Oh, can't you see that the angelic being I love - the purest, the best of women - is no other than your dear, dear angel of a - mother?'

'My mother!' cried out Arthur, jumping up and sober in a minute. 'Pooh! damn it, Smirke, you must be mad - she's seven or eight years older than you are.'

'Did you find that any objection?' cried Smirke piteously, and alluding, of course, to the elderly subject of Pen's own passion.

The lad felt the hint, and blushed quite red. 'The cases are not similar, Smirke,' he said. (192)

Pen goes on to adduce social reasons for his objection to Smirke as a step-father, but his floundering objections are ironic, for they are only a part of the story. Smirke is dismissed without ever having the chance to declare his love to Helen (who, as Arthur is aware, would find him no substitute for her son). The incident, however, serves to reconcile Pen to the loss of Emily. It is as though Pen's loss of a mother-surrogate

has been compensated by his dismissal of a step-father, and the intimacy between him and his mother is re-established.

Pen...described the dismal but ludicrous scene which had occurred. Helen heard of it with many blushes, which became her pale face very well, and a perplexity which Arthur roguishly enjoyed.... Pen and his mother had a long talk that night, full of love, confidence, and laughter, and the boy somehow slept more soundly and woke up more easily than he had done for many weeks before. (195)

Helen's sexual jealousy is fully aroused by Pen's other two flirtations, with Blanche Amory and Fanny Bolton. Both of these are siren-figures, though in different ways, and in both cases Pen falls under their influence to some extent because of his relationship with his mother. His flirtation with Blanche represents a direct revolt from the maternal influence, as she is the major's and the world's candidate for his hand. He falls under Fanny's spell because she sees him as his mother has made him think of himself, as the "prince of Fair Oaks." His attraction to her is sensual, but it is also a kind of auto-eroticism.

It is in the case of Fanny Bolton that Helen's jealousy, and the vindictiveness that goes with it, fully manifests itself. (The Blanche affair is more important to the social theme of the book, but Pen's love for the porter's daughter is more interesting from a psychological point of view). The mother readily believes the rumours of Pen's licentiousness, and she savagely turns on Laura to blame her for her earlier refusal of Pen when she might have prevented this new guilt. "I will never forgive you, never," she tells Laura, who is quite blameless in the affair. Her reaction is in fact neurotic, as is shown by her hysteria:

'And now - if this woman loves him - and you know they must - if he has

taken her from her home, or she tempted him, which is most likely - why still, she must be his wife and my daughter. And he must leave the dreadful world and come back to me - to his mother, Doctor Portman. Let us go away and bring him back - yes - bring him back - and there shall be joy for the - the sinner that repenteth. Let us go now, directly, dear friend - this very - '

Helen could say no more. She fell back and fainted. (640)

We should not miss the irony of the discrepancy between her stated intention of accepting Fanny as a daughter-in-law and her actual behaviour; for she dismisses her from Pen's sickbed, suppresses her letters to him, and never mentions the matter to him during his convalescence.

And it is over this issue that Pen finally asserts himself and breaks his mother's hold on him. His indignation at the "persecution which his woman-kind inflicted on him" over Fanny finally causes his outburst, which as he intends is overheard by his mother:

'They have kept her letters from me; they have treated me like a child, and her like a dog, poor thing! My mother has done this.'

'If she has, you must remember it is your mother,' Warrington interposed.

'It only makes the crime the greater because it is she who has done it,' Pen answered. 'She ought to have been the poor girl's defender, not her enemy.' (726)

In the classical Freudian view he has achieved maturity and asserted his identity; for "the task before each new human being is to master the Oedipus complex."⁹ Pen accomplishes this task by virtually killing his mother: he is told that if he speaks out about his anger, Helen will die; and in spite of all the grief and anguish over her death scene, the fact remains that he does speak, and she does die. Oedipus has changed into Orestes.

However, the picture is complicated by the figure of Laura, whom Helen is so anxious to match with her son. It is not difficult to see that Helen and Laura here fill the roles of mother and daughter -

Laura does in fact call Helen "mother" and Pen "brother" - and that the two are to some degree symbolically identified, like Thackeray's other mothers and daughters. Thus Helen, in promoting the marriage of her daughter Laura like any other mother, is to some extent wooing Pen for herself. There certainly seems to be some sexual gratification for her in her avid match-making here:

'O you profound dissembler,' [Pen] said, kissing his mother. 'O you artful creature! Can nobody escape from your wicked tricks? and will you make your only son your victim?' Helen too laughed, she blushed, she fluttered, and was agitated. She was as happy as she could be - a good, tender, match-making woman, the dearest project of whose heart was about to be accomplished. (341)

There is even a suggestion that Helen would be disappointed and so turn vicious, after the manner of Thackeray's other mothers, when she found herself excluded. For Laura is shrewd enough to realize that once Pen showed himself as loving Laura rather than Helen, Helen's love would change to hostility: "If Pen had loved me as you wished, I should have gained him, but I should have lost you, mamma, I know I should" (716), she says.

It is no accident that the only woman Helen would like her son to marry is her own foster-daughter. And this raises the question as to whether Pen does free himself from the Oedipus syndrome at all; for he does marry his "sister" Laura, who is in many ways an extension of Helen's personality; and it is possible that, as Fiedler puts it, the "sister" is "a symbolic euphemism for the Mother."¹⁰ Laura does have some independent existence, however; and Pen does not marry her until after his mother's death.

Pen has no actual father through most of the book; but it is noticeable that the same old man turns up as his rival in two of his amours. Old Bows, with his hopeless but touching adoration first for Emily Costigan and later for Fanny, is a sympathetic figure. Symbol-

ically, however, there is something sinister about him. Though he cannot possess the women himself, he has a certain power over them, and through them over their suitor; for it is he who teaches Emily the doll to act and Fanny the siren to sing. When Pen is running through the crowded streets with Fanny's image in his mind, he unexpectedly meets this shadowy supervisory figure:

As he was talking thus, and running, the passers-by turning to look at him, he ran against a little old man, and perceived it was Mr. Bows.

'Your very 'umble servant, sir,' said Mr. Bows, making a sarcastic bow, and lifting his old hat from his forehead.

'I wish you a good-day,' Arthur answered sulkily. (629)

The encounter is a chilling one, and is reminiscent of Lycius's meeting with the sage Apollonius in Keats's "Lamia," who seems "the ghost of folly haunting my sweet dreams." Rapaccini, in Poe's tale "Rapaccini's Daughter," is another embodiment of this demonic but powerfully rational father figure who is the hero's antagonist. There is in fact something archetypal about the sequence of Pen's loves.¹¹

Reinforcing the central theme of the relationship of mother and son and son's loves, there is the repeating pattern of relationships through the book of young men falling in love with old women, and usually living to regret it. So Francis Bell, Laura's father, has to marry old Miss Coacher; Pen loves Emily Costigan; Smirke loves Helen Pendennis; Madame Fribsby waxes sentimental over Mirobolant, who regards her as a mother; Mrs. Bonner the maid marries Lightfoot the footman, who is twenty-five years younger than she, and whom she regards "with a fondness at once parental and conjugal." (845). The same kind of unlucky attachments are prevalent in Society; and "misery, undeviating misery," is their inevitable result, as we are told in Major Pendennis's characteristic manner:

'Look at Lord Clodworthy come into the room with his wife - why, good Ged, she looks like Clodworthy's mother. What's the case between Lord and Lady Willowbank, whose love match was notorious? He has already cut her down twice when she has hanged herself out of jealousy for Mademoiselle de Saint-Cunegonde, the dancef; and mark my words, good Ged, one day he'll not cut the old woman down.' (93)

Again a pattern of relationships takes the place of a formal "plot" as the unifying structural principle of the novel.

Henry Esmond

Rachel, in Henry Esmond, is the most complex of all Thackeray's characters in that she is the most fully aware of the ambivalence of her emotions. In one way or another, throughout the book she is living a double life, having to conceal half of her motivation or disguise it as something else. The whole situation of the novel is deeply ironic in that the narrator is the ignorant object of her love, which in the first half of the book must be concealed because it is adulterous and in the second because it cannot be requited while he is in love with another woman. And her rival is her own daughter.

The same theme of sexual love and rivalry between the generations is developed here as in the other novels. Rachel was only fifteen when she married Francis, Lord Castlewood, who was several years her senior; and at first she worships him as an idol. Then, with their daughter and son growing, the familiar pattern of allegiances establishes itself: Little Beatrix knows how to pain the mother and placate the father: "From her mother's sad looks she fled to her father's chair and boozy laughter. She already set the one against the other: and the little rogue delighted in the mischief which she knew how to make so early" (118). And Lord Castlewood is already calling his wife a jilt

for being more concerned with little Frank than with him (119). But there is another "son" in the family, who is the real though unknowing cause of the growing dissension between husband and wife. By the time Harry is sixteen and Rachel twenty-four (Beatrix incidentally would be eight, for the symmetry of the eight-year age difference is maintained) she has noticed her idol's feet of clay, and is in love with Harry. At the same time, Harry remains in a sense a son to her, and he continues throughout the book to think of her as his mother. Thackeray fully exploits the irony of this situation by making Harry act as the confidant for the husband and as his advocate to the wife.

Rachel's sense of guilt in this situation is the main source of emotional tension in the book. When Francis is killed in the duel with Lord Mohun, her outward reaction is one of wild grief and adulation for her husband, and a furious accusation of Harry, who in fact is blameless for his death. Her long speech in the prison scene reveals a turmoil of conflicting emotions, to only some of which can she give expression. She accuses Harry of "standing by to see him murdered," of spoiling in some undefined way, since he first came to the family as "an orphan child," her marriage with her husband: "I worshipped him: you know I worshipped him," she asserts hysterically. "And I lost him through you - I lost him - the husband of my youth, I say.... my kind, kind, generous lord." And the whole is not only Harry's fault, but also "a just judgment on my wicked heart" (167).

This exaggerated reaction is caused by her own partial knowledge of her repressed wish to be rid of her husband and so free to be united with Harry. Her sense of guilt turns her against Harry: at the same time, she would like her accusations to be true, in that his complicity

in her husband's death would reveal him as her lover. Freud might have been speaking specifically of Rachel when he described the ambivalence of our feelings about the dead:

There was something in her, a wish of which she herself was aware, which was not displeased with the fact that death came, and which would have brought it about sooner had it been strong enough. The reproach now reacts against this unconscious wish after the death of the beloved person. Such hostility, hidden in the unconscious behind tender love, exists in almost all cases of intensive emotional allegiance to a particular person, indeed it represents the classic case, the prototype of the ambivalence of human emotions.¹²

The second half of the book, during Harry's long pursuit of Beatrix, is again based on a triangle situation, this time not of the husband, wife and son, but of the mother, daughter and lover. Again there is a deep irony in the situation where Esmond, hopelessly in love with the daughter, makes a confidante of the mother, who is hopelessly in love with him. A focal scene in this situation is that where Harry, kneeling to put on Beatrix's dainty red slipper, kisses her foot while Rachel looks on.

Mamma's feet began to pat on the floor during this operation, and Beatrix, whose bright eyes nothing escaped, saw that mark of impatience. She ran up and embraced her mother, with her usual cry of, 'Oh, you silly little mamma: your feet are quite as pretty as mine,' says she: 'they are, cousin, though she hides 'em; but the shoemaker will tell you that he makes for both off the same last.'

'You are taller than I am, dearest,' says her mother, blushing over her whole sweet face - 'and - and it is your hand, my dear, and not your foot he wants you to give him,' and she said it with an hysteric laugh, that had more of tears than laughter in it; laying her head on her daughter's fair shoulder, and hiding it there. They made a very pretty picture together, and looked like a pair of sisters. (337)

Once more, Thackeray dwells on the irony of the symbolic identification of mother and daughter, and the deep rivalry that is inherent in it.

This rivalry extends itself even to Rachel's second daughter, the child of her old age when she is married to Harry. We hear in the preface from the young Rachel that her father had to conceal his love for her so as to

avoid arousing his wife's jealousy (9).

The question of incest has been raised in criticism of Esmond (as it might be raised about Pendennis or any of his novels: but here it is to the fore). Does the hero, in marrying the woman whom he has for years felt for and spoken of as a "mother," commit "psychological incest"? Tilford has considered this question, and he feels that this obstacle to Rachel's marriage with Harry must definitely be present to her mind at least, for after her husband's death there is no other reason for her to consider her love for Harry sinful. Tilford suggests that Thackeray has avoided this issue in an over-hurried resolution, and that the final union of Harry and Rachel, in spite of the careful preparation for it all through the book, is facile.¹³ There is certainly no dramatic scene which shows Rachel at last overcoming her scruples and Harry at last discovering the true conjugal nature of his love for her. There is, however, an indication of what incidents and reactions would have constituted such a scene. In the last two pages of the novel Esmond tells us that he and his "dear mistress" would have remained tenderly attached but unmarried, but for "circumstances." These circumstances are that Beatrix has defected from the parental care (this process we have seen at large), and that Frank has shown himself to be entirely occupied with his wife and her family. "'Twas after a scene of ignoble quarrel with Frank's wife and mother... that I found my mistress one day in tears, and then besought her to confide herself to the care and devotion of one who, by God's help, would never forsake her" (463). In other words, Rachel marries Harry when her daughter is out of the way and her son has rejected her. It is evident that at least part of Harry's function is to take the place

of Frank. The maternal element is present at the consummation of her love for Harry, as the sexual element was present at its inception. The same can be said for the filial element in Harry's love for her, though throughout he has been less conscious than Rachel of his own feelings. He too has compared himself with Hamlet in his jealousy of his "mother's" affections (207): and this is a Hamlet who lives to marry Gertrude. (By an odd transference he calls Beatrix, the woman he is in love with at the time, "Jocasta" in the Spectator joke.) And at the end we may assume that he is aware, in choosing to propose just at the moment when Rachel feels she has lost Frank, that he is stepping into the son's place. As we have seen, this is no isolated instance of such a relationship, but part of a pattern that is repeated through all Thackeray's novels.

The Newcomes

A recurring set of ironic relationships is again a unifying structural principle in The Newcomes. But this time the main antagonism is between the claims of love and the claims of the World, rather than between the generations. Where the central image of the novel is the marriage market, the key figures, Colonel Newcome, Clive, Ethel, Clara Pulleyn and Madame de Florac all fall in love with one person and find themselves constrained by Society to marry another.

But the pivotal situation, the emotional centre for which the rest of the novel seems an elaborate preparation, is the domestic life of Mr. and Mrs. Clive Newcome, with father-in-law and mother-in-law in attendance; and here the familiar antagonisms and allegiances between parents and children are again in operation. This part of the novel is

extraordinarily painful. Thackeray has been unusually skillful in evoking, in all its detail, the impossibility and at the same time the inevitability of this social and psychological situation.

In Clive and Colonel Newcome we have an instance of what Thackeray showed more often with mothers and daughters: the identification and simultaneous rivalry of parent and child. The father is a matchmaker for his son; for Clive, balked of the marriage he really wants, allows his father to choose his wife for him. The colonel naturally consults his own inclination when he thinks he is consulting Clive's. We would expect him to turn into the wicked father-in-law after the marriage when he finds himself excluded; but in fact Rosey's allegiance remains with him, and it is rather Clive who is excluded. So, in an ironic picture of a ménage à trois, the old colonel is the gallant courtly lover, while the young husband finds himself de trop in his own household.

We hear of the colonel's devotion to his daughter-in-law, and how during the time of his prosperity he gives her jewels, a carriage, and the best of everything. At their opulent evening parties, he attends her with constant fidelity:

The solemn happiness of the colonel, who shall depict it: - that look of affection with which he greeted his daughter as she entered, flounced to the waist, twinkling with innumerable jewels, holding a dainty pocket-handkerchief, with smiling eyes, dimpled cheeks, and golden ringlets! He would take her hand, or follow her about from group to group, exchanging precious observations about the weather, the Park, the Exhibition, nay, the Opera....

Very likely this was the happiest period of Thomas Newcome's life. No woman (save one perhaps fifty years ago) had ever seemed so fond of him as that little girl. What pride he had in her, and what care he took of her! (Nc, 817)

"All this while," Pendennis goes on significantly, "we have said little about Clive, who in truth was somehow in the background in this flourishing

Newcome group." Laura too realizes the situation, and sees it as a reason for Clive's evident unhappiness. "I think,...that Colonel Newcome performs all the courtship part of the marriage" (843). And Clive sums up his situation, "I am not quite the father of my own child, nor the husband of my own wife, nor even the master of my own easel" (885). Silly little Rosey, who is so comfortable with her gallant father-in-law, cannot communicate with her husband, though she dutifully goes to his studio to

practice artless smiles upon him, gentle little bouderies, tears, perhaps, followed by caresses and reconciliation. At the end of which he would return to his cigar; and she, with a sigh and a heavy heart, to the good old man who had bidden her to go and talk with him. He used to feel that his father had sent her; the thought came across him in their conversations, and straightway his heart would shut up and his face grow gloomy. (828)

Rosey constantly acts in a way to antagonize father and son. She seems, and no doubt is, quite ingenuous; but Thackeray can indicate the complexity that underlies ingenuousness, and we can no more dismiss Rosey as a silly little harmless thing than we can so dismiss Amelia. Some part of her knows and delights in the mischief she is causing. "The colonel and I are walking on a mine," says Clive, "and that poor little wife of mine is perpetually flinging shells to fire it" (854). There is constant tension between father and son:

'We don't understand each other, but we feel each other as it were by instinct. Each thinks in his own way, but knows what the other is thinking. We fight mute battles, don't you see, and our thoughts, though we don't express them, are perceptible to one another, and come out from our eyes, or pass out from us somehow, and meet, and fight, and strike, and wound.' (855)

The situation becomes yet more intolerable when Colonel Newcome goes bankrupt, and the dreadful Campaigner moves in as a permanent appendage to the family. We know that Mrs. Mackenzie, besides having

been through the usual temporarily tender relationship with her son-in-law elect, had once set her cap unsuccessfully at the colonel (332). So she has been doubly thwarted, and she is doubly vicious towards father and son. On her daughter she maintains something like a strangle-hold. Jung describes the kind of mother-complex of the daughter which consists in identity with the mother:

The mother lives out for her beforehand all that the girl might have lived for herself....The daughter leads a shadow existence, often visibly sucked dry by her mother, and she prolongs her mother's life by a sort of continuous blood transfusion.

This is exactly the relation which Thackeray depicts, with an appalling clarity, between Mrs. Mackenzie and Rosey. When Pendennis visits the family in Boulogne, it is perceptible how the mother, for all her seeming love for her daughter, has become a vampire, and Rosey is sickening:

The young woman being in the habit of letting mamma judge for her, continued it in this instance; and whether her husband stayed or went, seemed to be equally content or apathetic. 'And is it not most kind and generous of dear Mr. and Mrs. Pendennis to propose to receive Mr. Newcome and the colonel?' This opportunity for gratitude being pointed out to Rosey, she acquiesced in it straightway - it was very kind of me, Rosey was sure. 'And don't you ask after dear Mrs. Pendennis and the dear children - you poor, dear, suffering, darling child?' Rosey, who had neglected this inquiry, immediately hoped Mrs. Pendennis and the children were well. The overpowering mother had taken utter possession of this poor little thing. Rosey's eyes followed the Campaigner about, and appealed to her at all moments. She sat under Mrs. Mackenzie as a bird before a boa-constrictor, doomed - fluttering - fascinated. (935)

The boa-constrictor inevitably devours the bird, and Rosey dies a victim to her mother. This image of cannibalism, of the parent devouring the child and love become rapacity, is not isolated in Thackeray's works.

The Virginians

Among Thackeray's novels, The Virginians suffers from a lapse in

tension. A sense of literary fatigue is perceptible not merely in the wandering of the story, but in his inability to evoke a sense of urgency or uniqueness about the characters' relations with one another. He is dealing with the same subject matter, but, partly because it is the same and partly because he felt he had written himself dry, it all seemed obvious and so, in relation to the other novels at least, boring to him. He settles for telling more and showing less: there is less dramatic depiction in relation to commentary in this novel than in any of the previous ones. The ironic tension of love and hostility between parent and child, which gives the domestic situation of Esmond its telling impact, somehow relaxes: of course young men always fall in love with older women, Thackeray seems to be wearily telling us; of course fathers are jealous of their daughters, and mothers of their sons. The same emotional situations which in Esmond had the quality of being universal, often seem in The Virginians to be merely commonplace.

This is an overall judgement. But there are still individual scenes and relationships which come alive in the old way: Harry's love for Maria is not just a tired reworking of Pen's for the Fotheringay, but has its own quality. And the evocation of the feelings of the Baroness Bernstein for Harry and George - the grandsons of the only man she could have loved - this is a subtle picture. Even in George's ruminative loquacities there is an atmosphere of strong feeling recollected in tranquility that has its own force.

The "plot" of The Virginians was to have hinged on the conflict of the two brothers who find themselves on different sides of the American War of Independence. However, Thackeray evidently lost interest in this, and again he binds his novel together by a system of relationships rather



"A Stepfather in Prospect." George and Harry Warrington
furious to discover that they have a rival in their mother's
affections. The Virginians, 95.

than with the development of action. This time he creates a symmetrical structure from the relations of a mother with her two sons and a father with his two daughters.

To demonstrate Thackeray's continuing concern with the sexual element in the parent-child relationship in this novel, one has only to summarize the story. Rachel Warrington, or 'Madam Esmond,' appropriately the daughter of Henry and Rachel of Henry Esmond, has twin sons, one dark and saturnine and the other fair and lively. When she has hopes of marrying a young man, both the sons are furiously jealous, and George, the elder, challenges the rival to a duel. At the same time, both are anxious to escape from the maternal apron-string. Then Harry, in England, falls in love with his cousin, a woman older than his mother who treats him with "a maternal tenderness." When each finally finds the woman he wants to marry, their mother in both cases does all she can to prevent their marriage.

General Lambert, a sympathetic character who is in many ways presented as an ideal husband and father, is Thackeray's major study in the relation of father to daughters. He cheerfully admits to being in no hurry to find husbands for his girls, and to being antagonistic to anyone who comes courting them. His daughter Hetty falls in love with Harry, but she is impatient with the emotion: "I am not going to set my cap at Mr. Harry. No; our papa is ten times as good as he is. I will stay by our papa, and if he asked me to go to Virginia with him tomorrow, I wouldn't" (Vns, 345). When her resolution is finally put to the test, she stands by it; for she does at last refuse Harry, and all her other suitors, to devote herself to her father: "She loved best to stay with her father, Hetty said. As long as he was not tired

of her she cared for no husband" (913). George woos General Lambert's other daughter, Theo, and this time the daughter is ready to part with the father; but the father is not so willing to part with his daughter. He finds himself a reason for his determined effort to part Theo and George, but it is clear, as George points out, that this is a trumped-up excuse. The father stands in the way of the daughter's marriage as the mother of the son's. When George knows of his mother's unjust bid to dismiss Theo, he asks, "Who had a right to stab such a soft bosom?" (797). And to her father he says, "You may part us: and she will die as surely as if she were Jephthah's daughter. Have you made any vows to heaven to compass her murder?" (817). This is strong language. But the demands of loving parents for the exclusive fidelity of their children come to seem more and more like tyranny and rapacity in Thackeray's novels.

The history of the Esmond family and its descendants, as we have it in Henry Esmond and The Virginians, is a prolonged account of the mating of different generations. Rachel Esmond first marries a man who is considerably older than herself, then one who is considerably younger and who has been the suitor to her daughter. Her son Frank breaks from the maternal tie only to marry a mother-surrogate. Her second husband, Harry, first loves a girl to whom his relation is 'almost paternal' then the girl's mother whom he had for years called his own mother. When Rachel and Henry are married they have a daughter of whom the mother is jealous, and who 'supplies her place' in relation to Henry when she dies. This daughter marries a Mr. Warrington, whom she despises in comparison with her father; and after his death she so devotes herself to her sons that she does all

she can to prevent their marrying. The sons, for their part, are jealous of her affections, and one tries to kill the man she wants to marry; the other himself almost marries an old woman. And finally we gather from George's armchair narrative that he is exasperated at the place his son Miles holds in his wife's affections, and much disturbed at the thought that his daughters may some day leave him to get married. And so it continues from generation to generation.

Philip

Philip is usually considered inferior in quality to Thackeray's other novels. And so it is, as a social document at least. We have come to expect so much of Thackeray in the way of delineation of social types and the depiction of the incongruities of the social scene, that when we are presented with such obvious re-working of old materials in this line as Talbot Twysden and Sir John Ringwood we feel that the book is a failure.

But if Philip is far inferior to Vanity Fair as an entertaining social panorama, it still shows a resurgence of vigour in Thackeray's ability to imagine and convey certain anomalous characters and relationships. Tufton Hunt, the reprobate priest, Caroline Brandon and Mrs. Baynes are psychologically bold conceptions. And there is a certain intensity, even violence, about the imagery that is reminiscent of Dickens. Images of death, of stabbing and sacrificing, and of devouring are recurrent. It is particularly the parent-child relationship that is visualized in these terms; and Philip and Dr. Firmin are a powerful incarnation of the antagonism of father and son.

Philip's somewhat feeble mother had died when he was a boy. But

he finds a substitute mother in the nurse, Caroline Brandon, the "Little Sister." She is a woman of the lower classes whom his father had years previously seduced by means of a bogus marriage and then deserted, and who had born the doctor's stillborn child. This Little Sister is a complex character. For instance, she shows herself all through the book to have no illusions about the "gentleman" who had betrayed her; but when she hears of his death she puts on widow's weeds and acts as though she had been his legal wife for thirty years. She stands in relation to Philip midway between mother and beloved. There is a scene in which Philip knocks down a man who is in many ways identified with his father (and to whom she herself afterwards acts as Judith to Holofernes); and she shows her satisfaction:

She took him into her little room. She was pleased with the gallantry of the boy. She liked to see him just now, standing over her enemy, courageous, victorious, her champion. 'La! how savage he did look; and how brave and strong you are! But the little wretch ain't fit to stand before such as you!' And she passed her little hand down his arm, of which the muscles were all in a quiver from the recent skirmish. (Ph, 146)

We are not surprised, when Philip is married, to notice that the Little Sister and Charlotte are bitterly jealous of each other.

Philip's allegiance to this woman is the greater for the fact that his father betrayed her. The son has a bitter grievance against his father, for like Esmond he can feel "no love towards the man who had... stained his mother's honour and his own" (HE, 69). "He clings to the woman and shrinks from the man," we are told; "is it instinctive antipathy?" (121).

Dr. Firmin, of all Thackeray's fathers, gives most reason for the son to shrink from him. "Talk of the * * *," say a group at the club, as the doctor enters.

The personage designated by asterisks was Phil's father, who was also a member of our club, and who entered the dining-room, tall, stately, and pale, with his stereotyped smile, and wave of his pretty hand. By the way, that smile of Firmin's was a very queer contortion of the handsome features. As you came up to him, he would draw his lips over his teeth, causing his jaws to wrinkle (or dimple if you will) on either side. Meanwhile his eyes looked out from his face, quite melancholy and independent of the little transaction in which the mouth was engaged. Lips said, 'I am a gentleman of fine manners and fascinating address, and I am supposed to be happy to see you. How do you do?' Dreary, sad, as into a great blank desert, looked the dark eyes. (24)

Here are all the characteristics of the devil incarnate, and the doctor is very much like Dickens's Rigaud in Little Dorrit. He does not quite maintain this diabolic stature, for he is reduced to human proportions, and mean ones too, in the later part of the novel. But the images which refer specifically to his role as a father are just as vivid. He is the parasite of his son, and one illustration depicts him as the Old Man of the Sea, maintaining a stranglehold on his preserver (553). As old Osborne's room is decorated with a sculptured group of the sacrifice of Iphigenia, so is Dr. Firmin's with a picture of the sacrifice of Isaac:

'You remember that picture of Abraham and Isaac in the doctor's study in Old Parr Street?' [Philip] would say. 'My patriarch has tied me up, and had the knife in me repeatedly. He does not sacrifice me at one operation; but there will be a final one some day, and I shall bleed no more.' (555)

Charlotte is similarly the victim of her parents, particularly of her mother. The way the hero's father and his wife's mother both cheat their children financially is an image for a deeper psychological deprivation. Of all Thackeray's novels, Philip shows the parents most clearly as the villains. The central image is the parable of the Good Samaritan; and in the last part of the novel Philip is forced to the reflection:

'Ah,' thought poor Philip, groaning in his despair, 'I wonder whether the thieves who attacked the man in the parable were robbers of his own family?' (616)

In the dramatic opening of the novel, a scene in the youth of

Pendennis before his marriage or the death of his mother, Dr. Goodenough comments of Helen Pendennis and her son, "If that child were hungry, you would chop off your head to make him broth."

'Potage à la bonne femme,' says Mr. Pendennis. 'Mother, we have it at the club. You would be done with milk, eggs, and a quantity of vegetables. You would be put to simmer for many hours in an earthen pan, and - '

'Don't be horrible, Arthur!' cries a young lady, who was my mother's companion of those happy days. (2)

This is no accidental joke. In a passage in Pendennis we are told that the noble family of which, as we know, Helen Pendennis was a member bears for a crest, a nest full of little pelicans pecking at the ensanguined bosom of the big maternal bird, which plentifully supplies the little wretches with the nutriment on which, according to the heraldic legend, they are supposed to be brought up. Very likely female pelicans like so to bleed under the selfish little beaks of their young ones: it is certain that women do. (Pnd, 997)

This tells us a good deal about the ambivalent feelings of the mother: but in a book of heraldry compiled by Thackeray we could be sure that all the pelican chicks would be male; just as we can be sure that the only people who are offered potage à la bonne femme on their menu, other than sons of the bonne femme, would be the fathers. (Such imagery is not unusual with Thackeray, who frequently sees human relations in terms of cannibalism. The Roundabout Paper on "Ogres" is an example of the elaboration of this image.)

The bulk of Philip, and of The Virginians too, is concerned with the sacrificing rather than the self-sacrificing side of parenthood. So Theo Lambert is Jephthah's daughter; Charlotte Baynes is Iphigenia; and Philip Firmin is Isaac to Dr. Firmin's Abraham. In calling Mrs. Baynes Lady Macbeth Thackeray no doubt had in mind her lines about her readiness to dash her baby's brains out; and when in Esmond he compares the deserted Rachel with Medea forsaken by Jason, he could not have forgotten that the

incantatory opening of the novel had evoked 'Queen Medea slaying her children to a slow music' (HE, 13). There is evidence that Thackeray was to develop this theme even more fully in his last novel, for in his notes for Denis Duval he refers to the story of the heroine, who was to be sacrificed to an evil older man, as that of "Henriette Iphigenia" (XVII, 338). Parents become progressively more guilty, or at least more patently so, through the novels. But it is always worth remembering, even when Thackeray is dwelling on the self-sacrificing side of parenthood, that it is part of the pelican legend that the mother needs to revive her young with her heart's blood because she has herself killed them.¹⁵ Thackeray is constantly exploring this deep irony of the parent-child relationship.

All through his works we see his ability to convey an ironic sense of the unrealized possibilities of human relationships, and of the realized improbabilities. "I might have been somebody's mamma, instead of ..." Becky writes to her husband. "The maternal passion is a sacred mystery to me," says the narrator of Pendennis, who proceeds to explore what is maternal and what is passionate in a mother's love for her son. "Is it mamma your honour wants, and that I should have the happiness of calling you papa?" Beatrix asks her ardent suitor Henry. "Can this monster ... make me marry him though I cordially detest him, and bring me a slave to his feet?" wonders Lady Lyndon of the man she is going to marry. Such questions, and the sense of multiple possibilities which they evoke, reverberate through the novels.

The question of how far Thackeray's depiction of these ambivalent relationships has autobiographical significance does not primarily concern us here, since we are considering the novels as independent artistic

entities. Criticism of Thackeray has been much occupied with the relation between his life and his work, which is obviously very close. This has been shown by Gordon Ray in The Buried Life and his standard critical biography, and also by Lambert Ennis,¹⁶ who has concerned himself most specifically with the aspect of Thackeray's work that we have been considering. Thackeray's letters are of course the main source of information about the parallels between his fictional characters and his friends and family. Not only is Helen Pendennis his mother, whose "jealousy after me tears and rends her," but the Campaigner was avowedly his "she-devil of a mother-in-law" (III, 465n), as was Mrs. Baynes. But he had not always considered her a she-devil, for there was a time when he wrote tenderly to his fiancée, "give a kiss to your dear Mother ... for me" (I, 305). It is also no accident that between Pendennis of 1848-50, and The Virginians of 1857-59, during which time his daughters had grown from children to young women, the emphasis shifts from the son's relation with the mother to the father's relation with his daughters. On the whole, Thackeray is fair. General Lambert is certainly a more sympathetic character than Helen Pendennis; but it is characteristic of Thackeray's readiness to find fault with himself as well as with the rest of the world that he speaks of his still unmarried daughters as "beginning to bewail their Virginity in the mountains," and so identifies himself with Jephthah.¹⁷

In applying Freudian psychology to an interpretation of Thackeray's novels, there is a danger of being too solemn and so forgetting the air of amused ironic detachment that often plays about his depiction of these primal situations. The Virginians may lack intensity as a sequel to *Esmond*, which is so deeply absorbed with these ambivalent



"The dear old woodman fell down on his knee, ... and in token of his fealty, he rubbed his venerable nose three times on the ground, and put the Princess's foot on his head." A faithful subject vows allegiance to Rosalba. The Rose and the Ring, 393. The sexual symbolism of the knife and the bowl is probably not accidental, for the allegorical significance of the background paintings in the similar illustration of Becky and Sir Pitt testifies that Thackeray thought carefully about his backgrounds.

relationships. But it can be a corrective too, for Thackeray himself was inclined to make fun of "Graveairs" in certain moods; and the intense preoccupation with the mother-son relation in the one novel gives way to the parody and easy generalizations of the sequel. So Eugene Castlewood comments of Harry's engagement to Maria,

'All men are so. The first woman I was in love with myself was forty; and as jealous as if she had been fifteen. It runs in the family. Colonel Esmond (he in scarlet and the breastplate yonder) married my grandmother, who was almost old enough to be his.' (Vns, 205)

Harry's infatuation for his "elderly Calypso" is comic, like his anguish at the suggestion that she has false teeth. Thackeray is ready to parody his own preoccupations with considerable zest. So in Our Street an amateur production of a play shows the hero madly in love with a woman who turns out to be his grandmother (X, 140). And in The Rose and the Ring, where so many of Thackeray's themes and character types turn up in a fairy-tale setting, the hero Giglio, like another Pendennis or Harry Warrington, gets himself engaged and almost married to the hideous old hag Gruffanuff, while the heroine is constantly wooed by father figures.

A great deal of criticism of Thackeray has been concerned with his role as a satirist of manners and his ability to paint a realistic panorama of society. His talent in this kind of writing is so obvious that (except in the case of Esmond, where the personal relationships are most obviously the main point of the novel) his depiction of individual psychology is often neglected. Percy Lubbock, for instance, in The Craft of Fiction has very perceptively described the quality of Thackeray's novels as social panorama; but he seems to ignore their

other qualities. In speaking of Thackeray's structure, he takes

Vanity Fair as his example:

Not in any complication of incident, therefore, nor in any single strife of will, is the subject of Vanity Fair to be discerned. It is not here but in the impression of a world, a society, a time - certain manners of life within a few square miles of London, a hundred years ago. Thackeray flings together a crowd of the people he knows so well, and it matters not at all if the tie that holds them to each other is of the slightest; it may easily chance that his good girl and his young adventuress set out together upon their journey, their paths may even cross from time to time later on. The light link is enough for the unity of his tale, for that unity does not depend on an intricately woven intrigue. It depends in truth upon one fact only, the fact that all his throng of men and women are strongly, picturesquely typical of the world from which they are taken - that all in their different ways can add to the force of its effect. The book is not the story of any of them, it is the story which they unite to tell, a chapter in the notorious career of well-to-do London.¹⁸

But as we have seen, the unity of Thackeray's novels depends on a good deal more than such 'light links.' All that Lubbock says of the novels as 'chapters in the notorious career of well-to-do London' is true; but they are also intimate accounts of people and their complex psychology; and their relations with one another, interlocking in an intricate system of triangles in which parent and child are lovers or rivals, make a pattern which is as integral to the structure of the novel as the unity of their social milieu.

In The Book of Snobs Thackeray hopes that Mr. Punch will continue to laugh at vice and folly, "never forgetting that if Fun is good, Truth is still better, and Love is best of all" (IX, 493). Henry, at the conclusion of Esmond, restates Thackeray's moral of "the vanity of success and of all but Love and Goodness:" "Sure, love vincit omnia; is immeasurably above all ambition, more precious than wealth, more noble than name" (HE, 462). But the more carefully we read the novels the more we can see that love is no more the summum bonum than goodness. We are

shown love that "beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things." But we are also shown love that demands all things, grasps all things, and devours all things.

HENRY ESMOND: DRAMATIC IRONY

The chief irony in Henry Esmond is dramatic. Henry Esmond is the protagonist as well as the narrator, and so he is our main source of information: at the same time he appears as ignorant, through most of the book, of the full significance of what he does and observes, and the full implications of the situations in which he is involved; ignorant of his place in the feelings of others; often even ignorant of their place in his own feelings.

But the dramatic irony is still more complex than this suggests, for it depends not only on a discrepancy between^e what the narrator knows and relates and what we can gather from his narration; but there is also a three-way discrepancy between what he knows, what he is prepared to tell us, and what we can gather when we take account of his deviousness. Furthermore, before we discuss him as an ignorant protagonist, we must remember that he has a highly subtle and sensitive mind; and before we consider his deviousness in writing an account that is heavily biassed in his own favour, we must acknowledge that he is a man of scrupulous moral integrity. It is on ambiguities like these that the ironic subtlety of Henry Esmond depends. The ambiguities are such that the novel has been read in many different ways, and frequently misunderstood. The responses of the novel's readers to the relationship of Henry and Rachel, for instance, have varied, as Tilford¹ has shown, from the shocked disgust of some contemporary reviews to the apparent imperviousness to what is going on that is noticeable in literary histories.

Dramatic irony is defined in terms of point of view:² and in Henry Esmond the fact that it is Esmond and nobody else who tells us what we are told is of prime significance. This is my preliminary assumption in examining the novel.

A protagonist who is ignorant need not of course be ignorant as a narrator; for the book is written for the edification of his grandchildren by the old Esmond, long after the events which he describes are over, and he has had time and opportunity to learn more about the causes he supported and the people who were closest to him. He narrates from different stages of experience. Many things are described with immediacy, as though the narrator were still close to and involved with the action he describes; at other times the enlarged perspective and increased knowledge of the old man suggest that his close-up view of the moment was a limited one. And there are various intermediary points, where the narrator comments on a previous state of experience from a more advanced one which is still not that which he finally acquires. Finally, we must bear in mind that the old man, whose experience has increased by stages towards wisdom, still has a limited point of view, which the reader is invited to supercede with his own.

Henry Esmond, the evaluator and seeing eye, is himself subject to our judgement. But there is a subtlety about this dramatic irony which makes a final judgement impossible. In some of Browning's dramatic monologues, such as those of the Duke of Ferrara or the Bishop of Saint Praxed, the speaker justifies himself in one direction while he unwittingly exposes himself in another: we as readers are in the superior position, for we realize that we know more about these men

than they know about themselves. Barry Lyndon is such a work: in spite of Barry's blustering, we are seldom in much doubt that his memoir constitutes a self-exposure rather than a self-justification. But, like the speakers in Browning's richer portraits, Henry Esmond eludes easy judgement. Often enough we may think we have found out something detrimental to his character which Esmond could not or would not have told us; but we can never be sure, and the suspicion will remain that after all Esmond is the best authority on Esmond. More than he knows himself he cannot tell; more than he tells we cannot know ourselves. We can surmise, but it is with the uneasy feeling that we cannot be certain. Such a qualification once made, we can proceed with the surmising.

The alert reader must be constantly questioning the source of the authority through the novel. Are we hearing the judgements of the unenlightened Harry, or is the statement made from the standpoint of the experienced old Esmond in Virginia, or from some intermediary standpoint? And lastly, how often are the statements of the old Esmond to be accepted as final?

The narrative is in the form of a memoir. Esmond writes of himself, however, in the third person, and this third-person narration gives an air of authority, as though we were hearing a full and unbiassed account. But, as Marshall points out,³ this objectivity is only apparent. Though Esmond disguises his book as biography, it is, in a deeply significant way, autobiography. It would not take much alteration to present the novel as biography: some pronouns would have to be altered; the preface would be eliminated, probably, and the first and last two or three pages adapted; and a few passages and asides in which Esmond as an old man addresses himself directly to his grandsons in Virginia would be cut.

But physically the novel would be little changed. The change in the implication, however, would be enormous. Our response to what purports to be an objective account of a third person, even by a noticeably biassed biographer, is different from our response to a frankly subjective account of a man's own life. In the one case we are prepared to shift responsibility for apparent adjustments of the truth from the subject to the biographer; in the other we are on the lookout for signs of self-aggrandizement, and we hold the writer responsible for them. If Esmond were presented as biography, we would tend to accept all statements at face value, and the judgements would carry the author's authority; and all that is not said, which in Esmond as we have it is so significant, we would assume to be irrelevant.

If on the other hand the disguise of objective biography were removed, and the narrative were presented as direct autobiography, with "I" inserted in place of "Harry" or "Esmond;" the change, though not as great, would still be considerable. The reader would be almost automatically on the lookout for signs of personal bias or misinterpretation, and would not be particularly surprised to find them.

As it is, however, though we have been told on the first page of the preface that Esmond is telling his own story, his device of telling it in the third person influences us more than we realize. We tend to take on trust what Esmond tells us in this way; and only at a subsequent reading will we realize that there are profound implications, and a whole set of new possibilities of other truths, which depend on the fact that it is Esmond and nobody else who tells us - or omits to tell us - certain things; and which we were near missing because of his device.

But Esmond is not deliberately misleading in his narration: the "device" is probably not used with any conscious intent to deceive the reader. He is obviously a man of strict integrity, who means to tell the truth about his experience. But we have to remember that it is Esmond who is telling Esmond's experience, and believe what he says with the reservation that it is he who says it; for he very often succeeds in passing off as the whole truth what is in fact only a part of it; or even what is not true at all. Esmond's conscious motives for writing of himself in the third person would no doubt be conscientious enough: he might even be trying to distance himself from the experience in order to be less biassed and so get closer to the truth; or he might use the third person from motives of modesty, to avoid the appearance of boasting. But to boast without the appearance of boasting is perhaps more vain than the unmuffled blowing of one's own trumpet; and as an attempt at attaining truth by distancing can be more delusive than a frankly subjective account, so such modesty is closely related to a deep self-centredness.

As an instance of Esmond's biassed reporting it is worth noticing in passing his persistent disparagement of Tom Tusher, which frequently looks like injustice: particularly when we remember that Esmond has reason to resent Tom as the man who finally won Beatrix. The two are rivals all their lives, and they are diametrically opposed types. This is Esmond's description of Tom when they are at Cambridge together:

He was ever a pattern of moral behaviour, losing no opportunity of giving the very best advice to his younger comrade: with which article, to do him justice, he parted very freely. Not but what he was a merry fellow, too, in his way: he loved a joke, if by good fortune he understood it, and took his share generously of a bottle if another

paid for it, and especially if there was a young lord in the company to drink it. (111)

"I do not mean to say ...," "Not but that ...," "Honest Tom ..." - with such phrases Esmond makes a show of doing Tom justice, even while he exposes him so thoroughly as mean, hypocritical and servile. But it is evident that Tom was at least good-humoured where Harry was sour and surly. And if Tom was astute in looking after his own interests, Harry is revealed in the next paragraph as being tarred with a similar brush, for he admits that he is reading theology in order to enter a profession "to which worldly prudence rather than inclination called him" (111). In their literary aspirations, too, they are contrasting types:

In his reading, poor Harry permitted himself to go a-gadding after all the Nine Muses, and so very likely had but little favour from any one of them; whereas Tom Tusher, who had no more turn for poetry than a ploughboy, nevertheless, by a dogged perseverance and obsequiousness in courting the divine Calliope, got himself a prize, and some credit in the University, and a fellowship at his college, as a reward for his scholarship. (111)

Esmond deftly makes it sound as though winning a prize is to Tom's discredit. But he himself is not immune to the pleasures of success, and later we hear that he burned the whole edition of his own play "in a rage" because it had sold only nine copies. We have to take account of this surly and resentful Esmond as well as of the "noble coeur," the brave and chivalrous hero.

Through the novel, Thackeray maintains the point of view with scrupulous care. For instance, where a scene is described at which Harry could not have been present, Thackeray is careful to let us know his source of information. The narrator uses the first person when he is interpolating his general comments and mature reflections,

and when he is referring to his present state as an old man in Virginia. But apart from the information of the preface and the chapter headings, which are consistently in the first person, the identity of the narrator with Harry is not for some while revealed. Henry Esmond as he appears dramatically in the narrative is nearly always referred to in the third person; but the occasional "I" slips in, as though by accident, and the incidence of this slip increases as the story reaches its climax and the point of view of protagonist and narrator become almost identical. In the last few pages, telling of Harry's rejection of Beatrix and repudiation of the Pretender, "I" and "we" constantly alternate with "he" and "they." The final passage, the account of Esmond's union with Rachel, is narrated frankly in the first person. For the sake of convenience, I distinguish the narrator, the mature Henry Esmond who is writing in Virginia, from the protagonist by calling the first "Esmond" and the second "Harry," whenever the distinction is significant.

So through the novel Thackeray is constantly maintaining the tension between the point of view of the young man who is involved and participating, and that of the old man, relatively detached, who is recollecting in tranquillity. Simultaneously, but more unobtrusively, he is inviting a comparison between what Esmond tells us and what we can infer for ourselves from what he tells us.

The theme of ignorance and knowledge, and of innocence and experience, is central in a novel that is concerned with the hero's search for identity and growth to maturity.⁴ But it is not always possible to tell how much Esmond knows at any one time, for on certain issues he is deeply and lastingly reticent. His motivation in some

emotional situations, for instance, admits of varying interpretations, and the relationships themselves are ambiguous. If we consider in a little more detail the question of how far Esmond is ignorant, the complexities of the situations become apparent.

There are certain things which Esmond can tell us, matters of plain fact, which he knew in his youth and knows at the time of writing, and which we can accept on trust. He is an accurate observer and recorder; but we must beware of accepting without question his deductions from what he observes. Often enough he will report words or describe gestures such as Rachel's blushes and wild glances, which Thackeray intends the reader to understand though their significance escapes Harry. We assume, too, that his reporting of dialogue is accurate: for it is our major source of information about what is going on beyond Harry's knowledge.

Then some things of which the young Harry was ignorant the mature Esmond does know, and does describe mainly from the standpoint of this knowledge. This is true, for instance, of his political outlook. Through the course of the novel he completely changes his political allegiance, and from being a royalist becomes a republican. This represents a considerable growth in knowledge; but already in the first chapter he subjects the Stuarts to ironic exposure, and asserts his kinship equally with the Lord Mayor and with Tyburn Jack. And although he occasionally refers to the Jacobite intrigues as "the good cause," as though he wrote still from his young man's point of view, it is usually with a touch of irony that is perceptible even when the passage is isolated from its total context. We do not actually see the process of Henry's disillusion with the Jacobite cause, because

Esmond shows himself as already disillusioned at the beginning of the novel.

Some other knowledge of the mature Esmond, however, he keeps from the reader during the course of the narrative, describing events as though he had no more knowledge than the young Harry. The revelation about the gold button in the last sentence of the book shows us that Esmond presumably knows Rachel was in love with him when she visited him in prison and unjustly cast him off. But young Harry did not know, and the narrator does not mitigate the effect of his grief by telling us.

The most complex question of all is to what extent the mature Esmond is still ignorant at the time of writing. Does he know, for instance, that Rachel was in love with him, not only when he was a young man in prison, but right from the time of the smallpox infection, when he was a boy of sixteen and her husband was still alive? If he knows, why does he not discuss the situation? His putting the blame for the failure of the marriage principally on the husband suggests that he does not know; and yet with the clue of the gold button which Rachel took as a love token from him a few days after the death of her husband, he can hardly avoid knowing to some extent.

It becomes necessary to postulate a sort of wilful ignorance on the part of the hero in certain matters of human relations. This applies equally to the young and the old Henry Esmond. In the crucial scene of Harry's reunion with Rachel at Walcote, she is almost explicit about the sexual nature of her love for him: "I would love you still - yes, there is no sin in such a love as mine now; and my dear lord in heaven may see my heart; and knows the tears that have washed my sin

away" (215); but she is not quite explicit, and this leaves just a possibility for Harry not to know. Such a possibility must surely be necessary for a man of his moral scrupulousness to be able to make her his confidante in his prolonged suit of her own daughter. It seems there is an intermediary zone in Esmond's consciousness, where he can know and not know simultaneously. This applies in his knowledge of both Rachel and Beatrix.

Harry, Rachel, and occasionally other characters, communicate with each other (or fail to communicate) by means of ambiguous language that almost constitutes a code; and mistaken interpretation of this code allows Esmond's state of wilful ignorance to persist. Thus "the smallpox" can refer to Francis's desertion of his wife, by which he forfeited her love; or to her loss of beauty, by which she lost his; or the occasion of her revealing - to herself if not to others - the sexual nature of her love for Harry. And whenever any of these three speak of it, we have to decide whether they are speaking of the smallpox infection itself, or of one of its code meanings; and, if they have a code meaning in mind, which one they communicate to the listener, and which one they intend to communicate. For instance, when Harry ironically acts as ambassador from husband to wife, and Rachel turns on him so furiously, the ignorant Harry asks bewilderedly what wrong he has done her that "for a second time" she should wound him (the first time was at the occasion of the smallpox itself):

'What wrong?' she said, looking at Esmond with wild eyes. 'Well, none - none that you know of, Harry, or could help. Why did you bring back the small-pox,' she added, after a pause, 'from Castlewood village? You could not help it, could you? Which of us knows whither fate leads us? But we were all happy, Henry, till then.' And Harry went away from this colloquy, thinking still that the estrangement between his patron and his beloved mistress was remediable, and that each had at heart a strong attachment to the other. (131)

Rachel in her code has told Harry that his embassy is useless, that her love for her husband is dead and cannot be revived, and that Harry himself is to a large extent responsible; but Harry understands her to be still pining for her wayward and neglectful husband; and apparently has no suspicion of his own part in the triangle. This kind of failure in communication pervades the novel.

Another factor which makes possible the emotional situation where the hero knows and does not know his place in a woman's feelings is the lasting confusion between kinds of love relationships. "Love" is itself an ambiguous word in the book, open to multiple interpretations. In the reunion scene at Walcote we hear of Henry's love for Rachel as changing from a feeling for "sister, mother, goddess" to one for "woman" (210). He accordingly asks her to go with him to Virginia, but she refuses, and he does not demur when she tells him, "You never loved me, dear Henry - no, you do not now" (215). Then, when she tells him of the sinful nature of her previous love for him, his remark seems singularly inept for a man who has just heard a confession of adulterous love, if we are to suppose that he has understood her fully: "I think the angels are not all in heaven" (215). It seems again that she has been telling him one thing while he has been understanding another. Their subsequent embrace Esmond describes in these terms: "As a brother folds his sister to his heart; and as a mother cleaves to her son's breast - so for a few moments Esmond's beloved mistress came to him and blessed him." As long as Harry can make himself believe in Rachel's love for him as purely maternal, he can in conscience confide in her while he woos her daughter; but it must surely take some wilful self-deception. The mature Esmond, at least, knows of the strong

sexual element in maternal and filial love too; for when Harry has fallen in love with Beatrix on this same visit to Walcote, the mature Esmond tries to analyse his feelings at the time for Rachel:

A filial tenderness, a love that was at once respect and protection, filled his mind as he thought of her; and near or far from her, and from that day until now, and from now till death is past, and beyond it, he prays that sacred flame may ever burn. (232)

This "sacred flame" which the mature Esmond, now married to Rachel, prays will ever burn is "filial tenderness" for her. It is a strange prayer for a husband; but so has their love been strange, partaking of many forms.

There are constant hints and even stated convictions of other characters about the love between Harry and Rachel. Both Mohun and the dowager Isabel suggest that Harry is having an affair with "the pretty Puritan" (145, 182). "Mother's in love with you, - yes, I think mother's in love with you," says Frank (224); "You and mamma are fit for each other. You might be Darby and Joan," says Beatrix (341); and so on. It is noticeable that Harry very seldom shows his own reaction to these suggestions, either in his immediate reply or in his commentary. He apparently chooses not to understand them, or not to take them seriously. It is a subject on which he prefers not to commit himself; for so long as he can maintain his intermediary state between ignorance and knowledge he can enjoy the advantages of both.

The steady infiltration of knowledge is the continuous process of the novel, not just in the emotional relationships but in the religious, political and military themes of the book as well.⁵ The strand of the narrative that deals with the secret of Harry's birth is representative of this process. Harry is brought up in the

belief that he is a bastard, and so he is believed to be by the other characters. The secret of his father's marriage to his mother, and so of his legitimacy and rightful claim to his father's title, is at first jealously guarded. Besides his father, only Father Holt knows it, and he is bound by the secrecy of the confessional. For a while it is a piece of knowledge that can be transmitted only by dying confession: and those whose lives had been made uneasy by the knowledge almost compulsively pass on the troublesome piece of information to their successors when they die. Thomas, Francis, and the dowager Isabel all make the same dying revelation about Harry's legitimacy. When Henry himself hears of it, he too keeps it a secret from the reader for a while. But the secret becomes less and less portentous as the knowledge spreads from Thomas to Father Holt, from Francis to Harry and Dean Atterbury, from Harry to the reader; then Rachel hears it from Isabel, and Beatrix and the Duke of Hamilton from Rachel; by the time poor Frank, the latest holder of the title that does not belong to him, comes to hear of it, it is communicated as a good joke by the Pretender. In The Virginians the 'secret' has become common knowledge.

This incoming tide of knowledge involves a progressive retreat from certain attitudes and allegiances as these positions become untenable. "A strange series of compromises is that English history: compromise of principle, compromise of party, compromise of worship!" (372) Esmond comments; and his own development is bound up with the national history. George Worth⁶ shows how he grows out of the fervent Catholicism which Father Holt had instilled in him as a boy, and settles for the steady Anglicanism of his country. In politics he abandons

first his belief in divine right, and then his allegiance to the Stuart cause, and comes to accept the mundane Hanoverians with the rest of his countrymen. Through the novel he learns to reject the glamorous alternative and settle for what he finds is the just one. He was an ardent Catholic, and he becomes an acquiescent Anglican; a Tory, and he becomes a Whig; a royalist, and he becomes a republican; a military hero, and he retires, sickened by the sight of blood shed in a dubious cause. The same growth of knowledge enables him to reject the beautiful Beatrix in favour of the more constant and unworldly Rachel.

Harry's allegiances are primarily to people, and only secondarily to principles (372): it is Rachel and his love for her that makes him an Anglican, though her father the dean believes his theological arguments have converted the young Papist. He idealizes persons, and then adopts their principles. Hence part of the process of compromise and the steady retreat from untenable positions as knowledge increases is the discovery that certain figures whom Harry had taken to be super-human are merely human after all; at the end the novel's personnel consists largely of an array of fallen idols.

The first of Harry's idols is Father Holt, the apparently omnipotent and omniscient Jesuit priest. He leaves Harry before the boy is quite confirmed in his faith, and so loses him to the succeeding influence of Rachel; and when Harry meets him years later in Flanders, he is able to see through the priest's pose of infallibility:

A foible of Mr. Holt's, who did know more about books and men than, perhaps, almost any person Esmond had ever met, was omniscience; thus in every point he here professed to know, he was nearly right, but not quite.... Esmond did not think fit to correct his old master in these trifling blunders, but they served to give him a knowledge of

the other's character, and he smiled to think that this was his oracle of early days; only now no longer infallible or divine. (268)

This divinity is to be further debased; for not only is he not omniscient, but he is so far from being omnipotent that eventually he shows as virtually impotent, a man whose every enterprise must end in failure.

This is the final vision of him as he is forced to cheer for the victory of his opponents at the succession of the Hanoverians:

The poor fellow had forgot to huzzah or to take his hat off, until his neighbours in the crowd remarked his want of loyalty, and cursed him for a Jesuit in disguise, when he ruefully uncovered and began to cheer. Sure he was the most unlucky of men: he never played a game but he lost it; or engaged in a conspiracy but 'twas certain to end in defeat. (461)

Rachel is Harry's next divinity: "she had come upon him as a Dea certè," we are told of their first meeting; and when Harry kneels to her the child Beatrix says, aptly enough, "He is saying his prayers to mamma" (18). Rachel too falls from her pedestal, though she never falls so low as Father Holt. After the reunion at Walcote, Harry tells us how the goddess of his youth was "goddess now no more, for he knew of her weaknesses;... but more fondly cherished as woman perhaps than ever she had been adored as a divinity" (210).

Rachel herself has a human idol who falls in her estimation as others do in Harry's. Her husband is "first and foremost, Jove and supreme ruler" (72). It is still early in the novel when she recognizes his feet of clay: "Then, perhaps, the pair reached that other stage which is not uncommon in married life, when the woman perceives that the god of the honeymoon is a god no more; only a mortal like the rest of us - and so she looks into her heart, and lo! vacuae sedes et inania arcana" (75). But Rachel is a woman who can love only where she worships, and when her husband topples from his pedestal there is no question of

her 'cherishing him more fondly as a man;' instead she finds another idol, Harry, to mount in his place.

In spite of what Harry says of his increased love for Rachel as a woman, however, it seems that he too must worship where he loves; for once he has found Rachel to be no more than human he transfers his adoration to Beatrix; and the mother like the moon fades at the advent of Beatrix's sun (241). Harry is by no means blind to Beatrix's human failings. His love for her is strongly sensual, but it is also worship, as in this definitive scene:

Having finished her march, she put out her foot for her slipper. The colonel knelt down: 'If you will be Pope I will turn Papist,' says he; and her holiness gave him gracious leave to kiss the little stockinged foot before he put the slipper on. (336)

His deification of Beatrix was sensual, and she loses her beauty and her divinity in his eyes simultaneously: "The roses had shuddered out of her cheeks; her eyes were glaring; she looked quite old.... As he looked at her, he wondered that he could ever have loved her" (459).

An idol for many of the characters in the book is the Stuart Pretender whose cause they support. Esmond himself is early disillusioned about royalty, and converted from his belief in divine right. But we see in more detail the process of the other Jacobites' disillusion. The women, particularly, are ready to worship the hereditary heir to the throne, and make a ritual of their preparations for his arrival: "'Twas then Beatrix knelt down and kissed the linen sheets. As for her mother, Lady Castlewood made a curtsy at the door, as she would have at the altar on entering a church, and owned that she considered the chamber in a manner sacred" (409). Progressively his worshippers find out the human failings of their deity. Frank, aggrieved at the prince's undignified

behaviour, admits "he is not like a king" (411). The prince is early subject to Esmond's irony:

The heir of one of the greatest names, of the greatest kingdoms, and of the greatest misfortunes in Europe, was often content to lay the dignity of his birth and grief at the wooden shoes of a French chambermaid, and to repent afterwards (for he was very devout) in ashes taken from the dustpan. 'Tis for mortals such as these that nations suffer, that parties struggle, that warriors fight and bleed. (418)

And Esmond also tells us of Rachel's loss of faith: "how deep her mortification was at finding the hero whom she had chosen to worship all her life (and whose restoration had formed almost the most sacred part of her prayers), no more than a man, and not a good one" (420).

Among all these toppling idols there is only one, Esmond himself, who retains his pedestal.⁷ Often enough he even usurps the pedestals of others as they fall. When Rachel ceases to idolize her husband, and finds "vacuae sedes," Harry is set up in the empty shrine; and later, when she knows of his sacrifice of the title, she kneels at his feet: "'Don't raise me," she said, in a wild way, to Esmond, who would have lifted her. 'Let me kneel - let me kneel, and - and - worship you'" (332). As surely as the other idols fall, Harry rises, both in the estimation of the worshippers and of the idols themselves. Francis is aware of Harry's superior moral claim to his position: "By George, Harry! you ought to be the head of the house.... You had been better Lord Castlewood than a lazy sot like me" (155). When young Frank tells Harry of his discovery that the prince "is not like a king," he simultaneously decides "somehow, Harry, I fancy you are like a king" (411). Harry has already taken Father Holt's measure, and found him to be no more than human, when Holt discovers Harry's true worth, and breaks out into expressions of admiration and regret that such a "noble

coeur" should be lost to the Jesuit cause (272). After Harry repudiates the prince, breaks his sword and ends the Esmonds' allegiance to the Stuart cause, the prince himself is almost ready to acknowledge the inversion of their roles as idol and worshipper:

'Thus to lose a crown,' says the young prince, starting up, and speaking French in his eager way; 'to lose the loveliest woman in the world; to lose the loyalty of such hearts as yours, is not this, my lords, enough of humiliation? - Marquis, if I go on my knees will you pardon me?' (458)

If all the other mortals who have been raised to godhead are thrown down, why is the one who tells the story the only one to be spared? Is Thackeray telling us that Esmond's kind of goodness, and his alone, is worthy to be worshipped? Or has this mortal deity been saved for dramatic irony to depose?

A closer examination of Harry's part in the two main emotional situations of the novel goes some towards answering these questions. These are the two triangle relationships, the first where Harry is one of two men in the affections of a lady, the second where he is himself the apex of the triangle, while mother and daughter are rivals for his love. In both situations he is either wholly or partially ignorant of the part he is playing, though it is only through his narration that the reader can collect information.

The first is a courtly love situation: the lord of the castle, or "Castlewood," is Harry's beloved patron, and Harry is the lady's faithful worshipper and "knight," who longs for a dragon to slay so that he might prove his devotion: "it pleased him to think that his lady had called him 'her knight,' and often and often he recalled this to his mind, and prayed that he might be her true knight, too" (105). All the usual tensions of conflicting loves and loyalties are in operation in this situation, with the added irony that the 'knight' seems

ignorant of his role as lover. It seems that the narrating Esmond, too, is not aware of the full significance of the situation, for his account of what happens in the marriage is heavily biased.

The narrator describes the deterioration of the marriage with an authority which his limited knowledge does not warrant; and according to his analysis the main fault lies with the husband. What happens by his account is that Francis, Lord Castlewood, first shows his moral weaknesses to his adoring wife when he deserts her at the time of the smallpox, and that he ceases to love her when she loses her beauty. Then he further betrays her by taking a mistress. So, as he ceases to love Rachel, she finds how little worthy he was to be loved himself. Once a woman has found out her idol's feet of clay, "what follows?" asks Esmond, and confidently answers his own question:

They live together, and they dine together, and they say 'my dear' and 'my love' as heretofore; but the man is himself, and the woman herself: that dream of love is over, as everything else is over in life. (75)

But we might answer the same question more fully: that when such a woman as Rachel has made this discovery, she sets up another idol in his place; and that her deification of the second idol might be a reason for her deposing the first. Similarly, when Harry returns from Cambridge to find a "secret care" preying upon his mistress, he finds no difficulty in diagnosing her sorrow - "his affection leading him easily to penetrate the hypocrisy under which Lady Castlewood chose to go disguised" (119). "No doubt," he says, the sorrow is the loss of her husband's love (115);⁸ whereas the reader can divine that it is more likely the lack of his. There is much that is penetrating about his analysis of the situation; but he does not tell us the whole truth.

If we consider the situation from the husband's point of view,

it emerges that it is he who has lost his wife's love, not she who has lost his; and we can infer that the reason is that Rachel has transferred her adoration to Harry. There are several hints that Rachel, after that complex incident of the smallpox, actually denies her husband sexually. He constantly talks of her coldness, and in his cups he contrasts her previous warmth of love with what she has become: "hands-off, high-tighty, high and mighty, an empress couldn't be grander" (104). If he takes a mistress, it might not be all his fault: "her coldness blights my whole life, and sends me to the punchbowl, or driving about the country" (128), he justifies himself. And his assertions are to some extent dramatically confirmed in Rachel's behaviour to him, for she frequently rejects his demonstrations of affection. When she announces her decision to spend her legacy on sending Harry to Cambridge, her husband, after a moment of sulkiness, bursts out impulsively, 'By G-d, Rachel, you're a good woman!' says my lord, seizing my lady's hand, at which she blushed very much, and shrank back, putting her children before her. (103)

When Francis abuses Rachel as a jilt, Esmond says piously, "so a man dashes a fine vase down and despises it for being broken" (129). His narration, then, always suggests that it was the husband who deserted the wife; but we have evidence that it was just as likely the wife who deserted the husband.

In this courtly love triangle, the lady is the most aware of what is going on, and has most to conceal. Even the husband seems to know more of Rachel's feelings for Harry than Harry, or even the mature Esmond, does himself. Harry would convince us that Rachel "never thought of or suspected the admiration of her little pigmy adorer" (72); but for all his bluff ingenuousness (Esmond is noticeably patronizing about

Francis), Castlewood knows better than this, and we gather he was early jealous of Harry. "Why, when you was but a boy of fifteen I could hear you two together talking your poetry and your books till I was in such a rage that I was fit to strangle you" (153). And he has his momentary deep suspicions of Harry, even when he is on a false scent in suspecting Mohun: the young man tries to exonerate Rachel by saying she was thinking of him, not of Mohun, when she fainted at the news of "Harry's" accident:

'But my lord, my name is Harry,' cried out Esmond, burning red.
'You told my lady, "Harry was killed!"'

'Damnation! shall I fight you too?' shouts my lord, in a fury.
'Are you, you little serpent, warmed by my fire, going to sting - you? - No, my boy, you're an honest boy; you are a good boy' (And here he broke from rage into tears even more cruel to see.) (156)

"Honest, honest Iago" comes momentarily to mind. Now Harry himself tells us singularly little of his reactions when his patron voices such a suspicion, although his blushes show his consciousness; and it must surely be a subject that would be much in his thoughts. Does the boy miss the constant hints about Rachel's love for him as completely as his silence suggests? Is even the mature Esmond, who has for years been married to Rachel, ignorant of the implications of the blushes and suggestive words and gestures which he reports? It seems more likely that the boy Harry knows a good deal more than even the mature Esmond is prepared to admit; that he is closer to being the "little serpent" than at first appears; and that Esmond is omitting to tell us a good many things which he knows, or at least suspects, well enough, but which might make his young self appear in a discreditable light. Harry, it seems, knows and does not know the implications of Rachel's jealousy over Nancy Sievewright, and the justification of Francis's jealousy

of him.

Jealousy, itself a mixture of blindness and over-vivid sight, is appropriately the dominant passion of the novel. Rachel is a victim of jealousy from the beginning to the end, and Harry's ten-year suit of Beatrix is a prolonged course of penance for her in which the punishment cruelly fits the crime. She is jealous of her husband, of her son, of her daughter, of Harry; Beatrix is jealous of her mother, and her father and Harry; Francis of his wife and Harry, and so on. Harry himself is careful to show himself always as the object of jealousy, never as feeling it. He says somewhat sententiously of Rachel's subjection to it, "a proof that she had this vice is, that though she would acknowledge a thousand faults that she had not, to this which she had she could never be got to own" (77). The same might with justice be said of him. It is not for nothing that Othello is his favourite play (365).

The next triangle situation is still more complex, when we consider the part the hero plays in it. As told from the point of view of the young Harry, the situation appears to be that he is hopelessly pursuing a disdainful Beatrix, while confiding in her mother and relying on a maternal sympathy from her. But, as we know from the last sentence about the gold button, the mature Esmond at least must be fully aware of Rachel's sexual love for him at this time. And he is again reticent about this awareness. Here he speaks of her reaction to his lover's confidences:

This passion for [Beatrix] did not escape - how should it? - the clear eyes of Esmond's mistress: he told her all; what will a man not do when frantic with love? To what baseness will he not demean himself? What pangs will he not make others suffer, so that he may ease his selfish heart of a part of its own pain? Day after day he would seek

his dear mistress, pour insane hopes, supplications, rhapsodies, raptures, into her ear. (249)

This sounds as though he knows the full extent of the suffering which he is causing Rachel; and, with some part of him, indeed he must do. But soon he is annulling what looked like an admission by suggesting that "compassion" is the only pang he is causing her; and is all too ready to believe her when she re-asserts the maternal nature of her love for him:

'I am your mother, you are my son, and I love you always,' she said, holding her hands over him; and he went away comforted and humbled in mind, as he thought of that amazing and constant love and tenderness with which this sweet lady ever blessed and pursued him. (250)

Only towards the end of the book, where Harry the protagonist and Esmond the narrator begin to merge into a single consciousness, does he seem ready to admit a knowledge of her sexual jealousy: after his tête-à-tête with Beatrix "Esmond's mistress showed no signs of jealousy when he returned to the room where she was. She had schooled herself so as to look quite inscrutably, when she had a mind"(398).

Beatrix's part in the triangle is also more complex than a single reading makes apparent. For Esmond again appears greatly to under-estimate his place in her feelings. As he says that Rachel cared little for the worship of her "pigmy adorer," when she was just betraying an adulterous love for him, so he says deprecatingly of his place in Beatrix's estimation:

Beatrix thought no more of him than of the lackey that followed her chair. His complaints did not touch her in the least; his raptures rather fatigued her; she cared for his verses no more than for Dan Chaucer's, who's dead these ever so many hundred years; she did not hate him; she rather despised him, and just suffered him. (249)

But we should be as wary in one case as the other of taking Esmond's words at face value. Beatrix is by no means as unattainable as he

likes to suggest. Harry makes himself unacceptable by wooing her in the guise of "the knight of the Woeful Countenance," when what she wants is an impetuous lover who will sweep her off her feet. In her long self-examination, at Harry's last abject proposal, she says that he was "ever too much of a slave to win my heart" (397), but that had she found the man she loved she would have followed him in rags. (It is one of Beatrix's most attractive characteristics that beside the elaborate deviousness of Rachel and Esmond himself she is refreshingly out-spoken about what she wants and why.)

She often gives Harry opportunities to win her. When Rachel leaves the two alone so that Beatrix can break the news of her engagement to the Duke of Hamilton, Beatrix leads instead to the subject of Harry's feelings for her. But he moons in his usual manner about his despair, and she tries to provoke him into being more demonstrative and determined: "I feel as a sister to you," she tells him:

'Isn't that enough, sir?' And she put her face quite close to his - who knows with what intention?

'It's too much,' says Esmond, turning away. (358)

Esmond may be telling us of the hopelessness of his love; but the image here is one of the woman who, within the bounds of propriety, is wooing the man, while the man is rejecting her. That he never really wanted her to accept him is suggested by his relief when he knows of her engagement:

'I have been hankering after the grapes on the wall,' says he, 'and lost my temper because they were beyond my reach; was there any wonder? They're gone now, and another has them - a taller man than your humble servant has won them.' And the colonel made his cousin a low bow.

'A taller man, cousin Esmond!' says she. 'A man of spirit would have scaled the wall, sir, and seized them! A man of courage would have fought for 'em, not gaped for 'em.'

At such a hint, even at this stage, it seems that if Harry had been really

resolute he could have made her break off her engagement: he could have become the man she would follow in rags. But his reply shows not only lack of resolution, but a good deal of pique as well: "A duke has but to gape and they drop into his mouth." Beatrix at this can only reply, with justifiable exasperation, "Yes, sir, a duke is a taller man than you" (362).

When Harry brings her news of the Duke's death in a duel, she momentarily believes - and perhaps even hopes - that it was Harry who killed him; (she afterwards owns, "I was frightened to find I was glad of his death" [397]). Harry corrects her, telling her sententiously, "he died by the bloody sword which already had drank your own father's blood" (385). History is repeating itself in more than just the fact of Mohun's being the slayer both times. Here the daughter is guiltily glad of her fiancé's death, as the mother had been guiltily glad of her husband's; and we can infer that for both it is wishful thinking when they believe that Harry, as their lover, had killed his rival.

Beatrix, the cynosure of all eyes, the sun that eclipses all other luminaries, etcetera, can be seen as a lonely and rejected woman. If Harry puts Rachel to the torture by making her watch him with Beatrix, so he torments Beatrix by making her watch him with her mother. Neither loves her, it seems, as much as she loves them. "Is it mamma your worship wants, and that I should have the happiness of calling you papa?" she asks Harry banteringly (357); but the spectacle of the absorption of these two in one another must give her more pain than she is prepared to admit. She foresees their marriage long before either of them, and by her own confession (she is franker than Rachel) she is not immune from jealousy (398):

'She loves you, sir, a great deal too much; and I hate you for it. I would have had her all to myself; but she wouldn't. In my childhood, it was my father she loved.... And then, it was Frank; and now, it is Heaven and the clergyman. How I would have loved her! From a child I used to be in a rage that she loved anybody but me; but she loved you all better - all, I know she did.' (356)

And when she is banished from the prince's presence by a conspiracy between her brother, her mother and Harry, she has the last word, and it is not calculated to make us think the better of the "saintly" Rachel:

'I always said I was alone; you never loved me, never - and were jealous of me from the time I sat on my father's knee. Let me go away, the sooner the better; I can bear to be with you no more.' (435)

Far from being proud, self-sufficient and disdainful, as Esmond seems to depict her, we have the alternative picture of Beatrix as finally a pathetic figure.

Beatrix tells Harry, explicitly and repeatedly, that he is the only man who has touched her heart (364), and that he 'might have had her' (365), even that she loves him (397). But he continues to regard her as beyond his reach, and persists in offering the wrong price to buy her - military glory, diamonds, the restoration of the Stuart dynasty - when what she wants is not to be bought but taken. As he prefers to believe that Rachel's love for him is maternal, so he prefers to think Beatrix is unattainable, and that she loves the world better than him. But at the same time, perhaps, he has a secret satisfaction in the half-knowledge that he could take either woman whenever he has a mind. He loves to be on his knees, and yet worshipped at the same time.

If we consider his behaviour about the title, we find a similar ambivalence. There is no doubt that his action, in foregoing the title to which he has a just and legal claim in gratitude to the family that

befriended him, is generous and heroic. And yet how he enjoys the situation! He admits as much himself (he is scrupulous enough in admitting his own faults: so scrupulous in writing himself down, in fact, that he succeeds in exalting himself by his own apparent humility): with the knowledge of his legitimacy fresh in his mind, he approaches the dowager, "perhaps secretly vain of the sacrifice he had made, and to think that he, Esmond, was really the chief of his house, and only prevented by his own magnanimity from advancing his claim" (185).

As he enjoys underestimating his place in the feelings of women, while having a secret knowledge of his own importance, so he enjoys being thought a bastard in society, while having a secret knowledge that he is legitimately head of the family. He likes to be on his knees before Beatrix, with a knowledge that he is the stronger; and he likes to be patronized by Frank, knowing that the right to patronize is really his:

What Harry admired and submitted to in the pretty lad, his kinsman, was (for why should he resist it?) the calmness of patronage which my young lord assumed, as if to command was his undoubted right, and all the world (below his degree) ought to bow down to Viscount Castlewood. (225)

The subtle masochism which Harry shows in his emotional life has a parallel in his social attitude, which is that of the inverted snob. How close Esmond's apparent humility is to pride is shown by his behaviour when Frank hears of his right to the title. "The fond boy with oaths and protestations,... and incoherent outbreaks of passionate emotion, wanted to kneel down to him, and kissed his hand" (411). Harry, we hear, puts a stop to these demonstrations as soon as he can; the scene proceeds, and Frank talks of quite different subjects:

'I am not the wild fellow I was; no, no, I have been taught better,' says Castlewood devoutly, making a sign on his breast.

'Thou art my dear brave boy,' says Colonel Esmond, touched at the young fellow's simplicity, 'and there will be a noble gentleman at Castlewood so long as my Frank is there.'

The impetuous young lad was all for going down on his knees again, with another explosion of gratitude. (411)

The rightful heir cannot resist another unobtrusive reminder that will put Frank on his knees to him again.

The scene with Swift is another example of the same prevalent attitude of Esmond's. It has been read as another instance of Thackeray's injustice to Swift; but it can equally be read as a further exposure of Esmond. He makes Swift think he is a menial, and then abuses and humiliates him for treating him as one. As usual Esmond is raising his status by posing as something less than he is.

If we need a few external references for this view of Esmond, we can look, firstly, to the preface. As this is written by his daughter, another woman who idolizes him, it is unlikely to tell us much to his detriment; but even she admits that he was unforgiving, and that his reputation in Virginia was that "he liked to be first in his company" (10). But it is from Beatrix that we have the most penetrating analysis. She can see through his pose of grave self-deprecation: "Of all the proud wretches in the world Mr. Esmond is the proudest, let me tell him that;" and still more shrewdly, she divines his secret longing, which he realizes in his memoirs, to appear in the role of a divinity: "I won't worship you, and you'll never be happy except with a woman who will" (363). But why should we believe Beatrix any more than Esmond, when she talks about herself or about him? She may well be incapable of the sort of selfless love she describes, and her exposure of Esmond may be only the result of

the irritation of a moment. There is certainly no reason that we should believe her more than Esmond; but nor is there any that we should believe her less.

If we take Esmond's memoirs at face value, we have a picture of a man who may be grave and melancholy, but who is possessed of all the virtues of courtesy, honesty, courage, wisdom, love and humility. He renounces a title from pure generosity; and though he contributes to the failure of a marriage, and causes some suffering to a woman who loves him by confiding in her while he woos her daughter, he does these things unwittingly. He hopelessly loves an unworthy woman, but finally learns to reject her and marry the elder and more worthy one. Through his life he grows to wisdom and maturity, not only in knowledge of the world, but emotionally and morally as well. There is something god-like about so much virtue and self-abnegation.

If, on the other hand, we take into account the dramatic irony, we notice not so much the god-like attributes, as the wish to appear god-like. His humility is inverted pride, and his self-abnegation an elaborate glorification of self. He renounces a title because he finds more satisfaction in the debt than the ownership. He keeps two women at his feet by maintaining a pose of being at theirs, and he takes a secret pleasure in his knowledge of their adoration while pretending to be unaware of it. And far from growing to maturity, he finally fulfills the infantile impulse to marry his mother.

Such multiple ambiguities as are implicit in these and other possible readings have exasperated some critics, who find Henry Esmond is artistically flawed. So John W. Dodds, who is elsewhere fully appreciative of Thackeray's irony, speaks in this way about one of the contradic-

tions in the novels:

We are never sure, during the growth of this strange affection, just what it means at any given moment. It is not improbable that Rachel and Esmond themselves should at certain stages be uncertain of the exact nature of their feelings for each other, but certainly Thackeray should know, and it is not clear that he did.... The reader retires in some confusion.⁹

But it would be unjust to assume that the ambiguities in the novel are the result of carelessness. Henry Esmond is obviously a highly-wrought work of art, Thackeray's most polished performance, and we can be sure that he was fully aware of the ambiguities of the relationships, since he painstakingly put them there. "There's a deal of pains in it that goes for nothing," he said of this novel (Letters, II, 815). And if Dodds feels that Thackeray does not know what is going on, it is because Thackeray is showing that many things, even contradictory ones, are going on at the same time. It is not surprising that Esmond - or Thackeray either - should fail to define the difference between filial or maternal and conjugal love, for they are not mutually exclusive; and the same applies to all human relations: knowing and not knowing one's place in another's feelings is of the essence of any deep relationship.

Generosity is akin to selfishness, and humility to pride. If it is uncertain whether Esmond (or Thackeray) has written a self-justification or a self-accusation, this is an added richness in the novel rather than an artistic defect: as in Vanity Fair, where we are finally left with the question of whether Amelia is as much of a vampire as Becky is a siren. If the "confusion" in which the reader retires is a sense of the multiple possibilities of life which are reflected in the novel, then perhaps he retires in a salutary state.

VI

THE NEWCOMES: "RESPECTABILITY"

The Newcomes is a work of Thackeray's maturity; it 'holds, like rich garner, the full-ripened grain' of his genius. Its thousand-odd pages, containing matter for dozens of novels, and its hundreds of characters are united into a complex whole which has its own centre of gravity and its own steady surge of direction. 'Orchestral' is the adjective that comes to mind. Esmond is a concerto, rich and elaborate, but depending for its effect on the dominance of certain limited tones; but The Newcomes is a symphony, in which every instrument makes its distinct contribution which is yet an integral part of the total effect.

Because of its scope and its maturity, and the quality it has of seeming all-inclusive, it is a suitable novel to choose for a more detailed examination of the workings of the various kinds of irony that I have already shown to be in operation in the novels in general. Again I will be considering Thackeray's irony as it operates on the subjects of social pretension, morality, love, and other aspects of experience. But where the discussion is limited to a single novel there will be space to demonstrate how Thackeray reinforces his ironic treatment of major themes through structure, imagery, and point of view.

Like all Thackeray's novels, The Newcomes creates a world, a complete milieu for its characters. There is a wide span of time, so that we see the changing motives and values and fortunes of a whole family and the world they live in; and a wide spatial context too, with a convincing evocation of location: Baden, Rome, Paris and Boulogne are all outposts where the English (or the Newcomes) establish their own

'little England;' and London, the major setting, is visualized in the same minute detail as Joyce's Dublin in Ulysses.

The world of The Newcomes is less flamboyant and less vivid than that of Vanity Fair, and the page-to-page reading is less piquant in this novel than in Thackeray's first masterpiece. One reason is that Vanity Fair contains more of the sparkling exaggerations of satire: it shows us one Dobbin in a world of selfish and rapacious cheats and humbugs; the ratio of good to bad is more realistic in The Newcomes, where we are shown a number of characters who, if not good, are concerned with the problem of how to live according to conscience in a fallen world. Its moral scope is the wider for its greater realism. There is of course social satire in The Newcomes as well, but whereas 'exposure' is the process of Vanity Fair, a term like 'portrayal' more closely describes the method of depiction in the later novel. The social satire of Vanity Fair is comparatively a hammer which cracks the rotten system apart; the social realism of The Newcomes is more like the mill which grinds slowly but exceeding small.

The Newcomes is the memoir of a "most respectable family;" and through the book Thackeray employs irony to point the intricate confusion between money and virtue, reward and desert, and "mercies temporal and divine," which constitutes respectability. In Culture and Anarchy Arnold evokes as his example of 'the whole middle class conception of things' a certain Mr. Smith, secretary of an insurance company, who had committed suicide because he "'laboured under the apprehension that he would come to poverty, and that he was eternally lost.'"¹ Bankruptcy is certainly as close to damnation as anything

the Newcome imagination can conceive; and in the dual preoccupation of middle-class Victorian England, "the concern for making money, and the concern for saving our souls," the one has come to stand for the other. This is the morning scene at the Park Lane residence of Sir Brian Newcome, head of the Newcome family:

It was a Thursday morning.... The household from above and from below; the maids and footmen from the basement; the nurses, children and governesses from the attics; all poured into the room at the sound of a certain bell.... The urns are hissing, the plate is shining; the father of the house standing up, reads from a gilt book for three or four minutes in a measured cadence.... At the very instant when the voice has ceased speaking and the gilded book is shut, the world begins again, and for the next twenty-three hours and fifty-seven minutes, all that household is given up to it. (185)

Thackeray's novel is chiefly concerned with those twenty-three hours and fifty-seven minutes in each Newcome's day; but he is also showing how even the three remaining minutes of 'reading from a gilt book in a measured cadence' are scarcely an interruption but rather an extension of the worldly pursuit, as the history of the commercial enterprise of Lady Whittlesea's Chapel shows.

The Newcomes, as Ethel once characterizes her family, are "unblushingly sordid" in their preoccupation with money. Yet their story is told in terms that constantly evoke the glamour and chivalry of romance, their mercenary marriages related as though they were the "high old way of love," and their inequitable transactions seen in the ordered terms of moral fables. The stylistic device of invoking fairy-tale and romance to tell a story that is mainly about filthy lucre gives a further ironic dimension to Thackeray's subject matter.

The central principle which holds together the social milieu, and all the varied characters who compose it, is money. The novel is "the memoirs of a most respectable family;" and the business, almost

the existence, of this family is banking. Money is important in Vanity Fair, too, and in all Thackeray's novels, but it is not so all-important as in The Newcomes. Vanity Fair is set in the Regency, and social distinctions are still somewhat in terms of "rank" as in the eighteenth century: birth is still the major means of gradation in Society; and though the Osbornes are becoming powerful, they are still branded as nouveau riche. In The Newcomes, set in the more fully industrialized society of the 1830's and '40's, the concept of "class" based on money is fully developed;² it is no longer very important in Society that the Newcome family is nouveau, for what matters is that it is riche. Becky was ready to manage on nothing a year so long as she could get invited to Gaunt House; but the aspiring Ethel needs a substantial bank balance behind her as well as ingenuity to make her way in Society. Birth and money are "the two humbugs which divide the social empire of this kingdom between them." From Vanity Fair to The Newcomes the emphasis shifts from the one to the other.

The banking business is integral to the novel. It is seen not just as a way to make a living, but as a whole existence. People are judged by the size of their balance, relationships progress in terms of who opens and who closes how large an account, battles are fought in which the manoeuvres are transferring an account or bouncing a cheque.

Love, morality, art and faith are all discussed in financial imagery. When Colonel Newcome returns to England after thirty years in India, and visits his half-brothers at the bank in anticipation of a warm welcome, he is bitterly disappointed at their coldness. He betrays his emotion to the cabman who drives him away: "very likely the cabman thought he was a disappointed debtor who had asked in vain to renew a

bill. In fact, Thomas Newcome had overdrawn his little account. There was no such balance of affection in that bank of his brothers as the simple creature had expected to find there" (80). The same imagery is used for Clive's frustrated love for Ethel: "one great passion he had had and closed the account of it" (818). The mercenary metaphor is not used for the mercenary marriage alone: even passion can be squandered like capital, where there is no steady income of affection to support a relationship:

Many a young couple of spendthrifts get through their capital of passion in the first twelve months and have no love left for the daily demands of after-life. O me! for the day when the bank account is closed, and the cupboard empty, and the firm of Damon and Phyllis insolvent! (491)

Love is a commodity like any other, and with no great market value either. We hear, for instance, that the only person who might be said to love the ailing Sir Brian Newcome is his valet, "who loves him to the extent of fifty pounds a year and perquisites" (629). Other emotions are equally reducible to pounds, shillings and pence. Hobson Newcome's grief for his mother's death can be calculated in inverse proportion to the size of his inheritance, and he speaks of it in terms of "the weight of business which this present affliction entails" (42).

Religion is one of the bank's chief assets. Old Mrs. Newcome, the grand old lady of Hobson Brothers and Newcome, is a Quaker, and Thomas Newcome, the founder of the family, netted this prize for a wife, along with her bank, by becoming a convert, and being careful to conciliate "the Quaker connexion." The servants in her house, the "serious paradise" at Clapham, are all devotees of various bizarre dissenting religions, and the visitors are a mixture of "clerical gentlemen" and

"clerks from the bank." Her funeral is a grand fête testifying to the union of commerce and religion, which triumphantly carry the aristocracy in their wake:

There was such a crowd you might have thought it was a Derby Day. The carriages of some of the greatest City firms, and the wealthiest dissenting houses; several coaches full of ministers of all denominations, including the Established Church; the carriage of the Right Honourable the Earl of Kew, and that of his daughter, Lady Ann Newcome, attended that revered lady's remains to their final resting-place. (59)

People are evaluated by their income, as we hear from Pendennis's long lecture in which he tries to dissuade Clive from loving Ethel. Clive is not a worthy suitor for Ethel, because the best stock in the marriage market goes to the highest bidder, and Clive cannot "count purses with the Sultan Farintosh." It is a matter of "bargain and sale," and like Circassian girls, who are sold by their parents to their husbands, English girls have learned to be "proud of their bringing up, and take rank according to the prices which they fetch." Clive is deluded if he thinks that youth, intelligence, goodness and love, even when accompanied by a comfortable if not immense income, have much value in this trade:

'You go and buy yourself some new clothes, and a fifty-pound horse, and put a penny rose in your button-hole, and ride past her window, and think to win this prize? O you idiot! A penny rosebud! Put money in your purse. A fifty-pound hack when a butcher rides as good a one! - Put money in your purse. A brave young heart, all courage and love and honour! Put money in thy purse - t'other coin don't pass in the market.' (537)

Thrift and prudence are the virtues which have market value, not love and generosity.

The marriage market itself is a central image in the novel, and the repetition of the mercenary marriage and its outcome between various couples is a unifying structural principle. Colonel Newcome in his youth loved Léonore, but in obedience to her parents she marries the elderly Count de Florac, and he marries a woman whom he does not love. History

repeats itself in his son Clive, who, balked of his cousin Ethel because her family has destined her for an earl, marries the silly, rich Rosey on the rebound and is miserable. The collapse of Clara Pulleyn's mercenary marriage to Barnes Newcome is the means of showing Ethel the error of her ways, but it is too late for her to marry Clive. Ethel's own parents, banker and earl's daughter, had made a blood-money bargain, and her father thereafter had to submit to the calm contempt of his wife and her family. Across the channel it is the same story, with variations: the Duchesse d'Ivry, with an aristocratic husband who is forty-five years older than she, cannot bear his company, and lives a life of dubious virtue in various continental resorts. Léonore's son Paul de Florac, who himself married and was separated from the rich Miss Higg of Manchester, is scornful of the perversity of the English, who have adopted the French mercenary marriage without the French tolerance of adultery: "We make marriages of convenience in our country, que diable, and what follows follows; but no scandal afterwards! Do not adopt our institutions à demi, my friend" (766). According to the philosophy of Society, marriage "is but a question of money on one side and the other" (406). But those who hold this tenet, however substantial their actual bank balance, find through the course of the novel that there are multiple debts accruing in trust and affection. So Léonore de Florac reflects: "Do you know that the children of those who do not love in marriage seem to bear an hereditary coldness, and do not love their parents as other children do?" (629). The Newcomes is a set of variations on this theme.

The seed of this aspect of the novel is contained in The Book of Snobs, in the chapter on "Great City Snobs," where the alliance between

the aristocrat and the banker is described:

Old Stiffneck [is] obliged to bow down his head and swallow his infernal pride, and drink the cup of humiliation poured out by Pump and Aldgate's butler. "Pump and Aldgate," says he, 'your grandfather was a bricklayer, and his hod is still kept in the bank. Your pedigree begins in a workhouse; mine can be dated from all the royal palaces of Europe.... I despise you, but I want your money; and I will sell you my beloved daughter, Blanche Stiffneck, for a hundred thousand pounds, to pay off my mortgages. Let your son marry her, and she shall become Lady Blanche Pump and Aldgate.'" (IX, 297)

We remember that Thomas Newcome came from the workhouse, and his son Brian marries an earl's daughter who, like Pump's wife, patronizes him. This is the family's progression:

Old Pump sweeps a shop, runs of messages, becomes a confidential clerk and partner. Pump the Second becomes chief of the house, spins more and more money, marries his son to an Earl's daughter. Pump Tertius goes on with the bank; but his chief business in life is to become the father of Pump Quartus, who comes out a full-blown aristocrat, and takes his seat as Baron Pumpington, and his race rules hereditarily over this nation of Snobs. (IX, 299)

It is the history of the Newcomes in a nutshell, only they have managed to speed up the progress through the generations. Barnes Newcome, or Pump Tertius, bids fair to taking on himself the role of Pump Quartus as well.

"I believe in elder sons, and a house in the town, and a house in the country" (596); this is the creed of the girl bred in society. If money is made a religion, so religion is made a commercial venture. This is the point of the account, which is a little history in itself, of Charles Honeyman and Lady Whittlesea's, the Chapel that is owned by a Jewish winemerchant, Sherrick, and built over his wine cellar. Charles Honeyman finds that he can synthesize religious fervour and convey it in calculated eloquence which he turns to good account; and his crocodile tears are current coin in certain circles of sentimental ladies. He is always "casting his eyes towards the chandelier," "beautifully smothering

his emotion," or, when 'seraphically' playing the piano, "looking as if he would be lifted off the screw music-stool, and flutter up to the ceiling" (283). He is a genteel Chadband, a high-class religious gigolo, who makes the most of his female devotees. For all his unctuous piety, Fred Bayham's evaluation of him is probably accurate: "It's my belief you'd rather lie than not" (162). The chapel, which seems to have been consecrated to a society belle rather than a saint corresponds to its minister in being adapted to a genteel congregation - or clientèle - who like to wallow in soothing religious sentiment that glosses over what they consider gross. "It's better to sit over vaults with wine in them than coffins" is the comfortable conclusion (149). Sherrick, who refers to it as "the shop overhead," runs the chapel as a theatre: the pews are sold like boxes, and the best performers are carefully booked and billed. When Honeyman is arrested for debt by Moss the money-lender, Bayham reflects, "One Jew has the chapel, and another Hebrew has the clergyman. It's singular, ain't it?" (322).

Sherrick, a minor character in the story, has considerable thematic significance in a novel that depicts a materialistic society. For him, as for the other characters in their varying degrees, every enterprise is undertaken as a commercial venture; only he is frank about the fact where others try to drape their greed in virtue. He is quite as ready to talk about the chapel as "a good speculation" as he is about his theatre, his wine business, or his papers. The promoters of the Pall Mall Gazette, for which Pendennis writes, will talk of its literary merits, its support of the arts, and the principles it stands for; they keep quiet about their financial expectations, though Fred Bayham at least is not above prostituting his muse. But so far as Sherrick is

concerned the paper's chief function is financial. He himself once speculated in papers, and had no scruples about principles. "I tried a Tory one, moderate Liberal, and out-and-out uncompromising Radical. I say, what d'you think of a religious paper, the Catechism, or some such name? Would Honeyman do as editor?" (329). Religion, politics and the arts are equally grist to Sherrick's mill, as they are in more subtle ways to the whole world of the Newcomes.

The subordination of high ideals to money is succinctly realized in the image of the silver coconut tree which adorns Colonel Newcome's table in his splendid mansion in Tyburnia. It is when the stock of the Bundelcund Banking Company is mushrooming, and when the colonel - himself now in the banking business like his heartless brothers - cannot resist a display of opulence, that he is presented with this emblem of prosperity:

There was a superb silver coco-nut-tree, whereof the leaves were dexterously arranged for holding candles and pickles; under the coco-nut was an Indian prince on a camel giving his hand to a cavalry officer on horse-back - a howitzer, a plough, a loom, a bale of cotton, on which the East India Company's arms, a brahmin, Britannia, and Commerce, with a cornucopia were grouped round the principal figures. (824)

Mercantilism and imperialism, war and peace, agriculture, industry and trade, along with religion and nationalism, are all lumped together in silver, immortalized in "this chaste and elegant specimen of British art," and set to carry pickles for the delectation of a Newcome family. The coconut tree wanders through the latter half of the novel, performing its own little Odyssey, until it too ends up in the hands of "the Hebrew gentleman."

For this view of The Newcomes as a novel about money, Barnes

Newcome is the focal character. He of all the Newcomes has his heart most firmly located in his pocket. He is the banker par excellence. His relations with his friends and family are governed by the bank; because they have substantial accounts, he is ready to receive both Clive and Lord Highgate into his house - one of whom would like to carry off Barnes's sister, and the other his wife. His chief information on such subjects as his sister's marriage and his wife's elopement comes in the form of a wire from the bank: "Consol's, so-and-so. French Rentes, so much. Highgate's and Farintosh's accounts withdrawn" (801). In his feud with Colonel Newcome he will not accept a challenge, but he strikes "such a blow as might be expected from that quarter" - that is, a financial one - and explodes the Bundelcund venture by refusing to honour its bills at a critical period. He not only buys his wife, but sells her for what he can get for her when he finds he has made a bad bargain, exacting the last penny in damages from the man to whom she escaped for protection from her husband. "In the City we have no hearts, you know," he jokes (688). And his uncle, Colonel Newcome, learns the truth of this through the novel, until at the end he says bitterly to his brother,

'We understand that sort of thing. London bankers have no hearts - for these last fifty years past that I have known you and your brother, and my aimiable nephew, the present commanding officer, has there been anything in your conduct that has led me to suppose that you had?' (840)

It is part of the intricate structure of the novel that the great World which it depicts in such painstaking detail is reflected in miniature in numerous little microcosms through the book. Each little community or institution, each gathering of people, even a single object like the coconut tree, has the quality of being complete in itself, with its own centre of gravity and its own set of revolving satellites within the major

system. When Henry James sets a scene for some encounter between his characters, he is always concerned to make it appropriate to this one particular occasion, so that what is excluded is as significant as what is included. He makes us feel, for instance, that it is in Gloriani's garden and nowhere else that Strether should have his revelation on how you must "live all you can." Thackeray, on the other hand, and particularly in this novel, includes as much as he can in one scene, and each setting or gathering becomes an image of the whole world, rather than a selected part of it. This is partly what makes for the repetitive quality of Thackeray's novels: in structure they are often comparable with such a work as Rasselas, where the prince is always escaping from one delusively "Happy Valley" to another. Rasselas is an ironic structure where every escape proves to be only a further penetration into the prison. The structure of microcosms in The Newcomes has something of the same quality: so, for instance, when Ethel thinks she has found a certain peace and moral conviction in Madame de Florac's garden, which seems to offer a changeless Grecian Urn existence, she still discovers that all she can accomplish there is a confirmation of her commitment to the Newcome world.

The most fully realized of these microcosms in The Newcomes is perhaps the Ridley's lodging house in London. Appropriately in the garret is Fred Bayham, the embodiment of literary Bohemia, who spouts flowing rhetoric while eating a mutton chop off a fork, clad in his dressing-gown at noon. On the second floor is Charles Honeyman, the representative of fashionable religion, and on the first is - Bagshot, Esq., M.P., who is more ready to discuss wine than politics. The landlord on the ground floor is a lord's butler, whose son becomes a great painter;

another lodger, little Miss Cann, plays the piano well enough to inspire the imagination of this genius. Below stairs, of course, one finds the servants and "servi servorum," Julia the cook and Slavey. Under this one roof at 23 Walpole Street is the world, with all its pretensions and aspirations, its virtues and hypocrisies. The same can be said of the colonel's party at Fitzroy Square, or of Miss Honeyman's lodging house at Brighton.

Breakfast is a favourite occasion for Thackeray,³ for morning prayers, letters, the papers, and bacon and eggs economically evoke all his characters' responses. After the brief ritual of family worship in his house in Park Lane, Sir Brian turns his attention to the papers and politics, and as he gives vent to his Tory indignation the image is one that ironically reduces the whole of England to the proportions of an egg:

'The spirit of Radicalism abroad in this country,' said Sir Brian Newcome, crushing his egg-shell desperately, 'is dreadful, really dreadful. We are on the edge of a positive volcano.' Down went the egg-spoon into its crater. (192)

To some extent every meal and social gathering described in the novel (and there are many), with its selection and distribution of guests, becomes a significant assemblage of all the elements of middle-class society. The world is cluttered with microcosms that reflect worldliness: Baden is a congress of nations, a modern Babel in which each gambler curses his luck in his own tongue; Rosey justifiably boasts that her party is an omnium gatherum, and so on. We begin to feel like Florac's wife, the princess, in her splendid Louis XVI chamber of mirrors:

Opposite that looking-glass, between the tall windows, at some forty feet distance, is another huge mirror, so that when the poor princess is in bed, in her prim old curl-papers, she sees a vista of elderly princesses

twinkling away into the dark perspective; and is so frightened that she and Betsy, her Lancashire maid, pin up the jonquil silk curtains over the bed-mirror after the first night; though the princess never can get it out of her head that her image is still there, behind the jonquil hangings, turning as she turns, waking as she wakes, &c. (603)

It is a powerful image, suggesting, as the repeating microcosms suggest, that the world is inescapable. And in this glittering but often suffocating world there are many, like Barnes, who are in their element; some, like the colonel, who are unaware of what the mirror shows them; a few who, like the princess, try to blot it out. But there are others too who try to face their own reflections with confidence and yet with knowledge. Learning how to live, at once with the world and with one's own consciousness, is one of the main subjects of the novel. This is the task before Ethel, who is a product of her environment and at the same time manages eventually to assert herself against it. "You belong to your belongings, my dear," Lady Kew tells her (426); but Ethel has to develop in moral consciousness to the point where her belongings belong to her. In the first part of the novel she is gaining money, prestige or suitors; but by the end she has learned how to give them away.

Ethel Newcome is Thackeray's best heroine; indeed she compares favourably with any heroine of the nineteenth century novel. She has Becky's strong character and charm, without Becky's siren's tail; she is like Beatrix in many ways - Thackeray drew her from Sally Baxter, in whom he recognized Beatrix incarnate⁴ - but where Beatrix is finally tainted by her ambition and selfishness, Ethel is redeemed, and convincingly so.

The Newcomes is slow to get going. Thackeray takes his time in building up the world in which his individual dramas are to be enacted.

The effect is the more powerful for being cumulative; and by the time Clive, Ethel and the rest reach their moments of decision, we have a full awareness of the complex pressures to which they are subject.

Ethel has been bred for worldly success. All along she sees the essential meanness of her family's goals: "There never were, since the world began, people so unblushingly sordid!" she exclaims (425), and she is sarcastic about the suggestion that Clive is beneath her: "he is only a poor painter, and we forsooth are bankers in the city" (425). At the same time she has an appetite for the kind of success which she simultaneously despises; for though she is too intelligent to be attracted by mere wealth and opulence, she has the instincts of a coquette, and she cannot resist the personal triumph which the adoration of rich suitors signifies in a society where they are considered the best prizes. She shows this inner conflict in her long self-examination when she talks to Madame de Florac.

I, who pretend to revolt, I like [society] too; and I, who rail and scorn flatterers - oh, I like admiration! I am pleased when the women hate me, and the young men leave them for me. Though I despise many of these, yet I can't help drawing them towards me. One or two of them I have seen unhappy about me, and I like it; and if they are indifferent I am angry, and never tire till they come back. I love beautiful dresses; I love fine jewels; I love a great name and a fine house - oh, I despise myself, when I think of these things! When I lie in bed, and say I have been heartless and a coquette, I cry with humiliation; and then rebel and say, Why not? - and to-night - yes, to-night - after leaving you, I shall be wicked, I know I shall. (630)

In this situation of despising the very goals she aims at, she protects herself with irony; and in such actions as that of wearing the green "sold" ticket on the front of her dress, she makes a show of rebelling while she conforms to her family's plans. It is only when she sees the disastrous end of her brother's mercenary marriage, a catastrophe that touches her closely, that she learns enough to break off her own

engagement to Farintosh and re-examine the values by which she has been living. The conversion is not glib, and Ethel is not let off lightly. (The main reason for the superiority of The Newcomes over Pendennis is that we are never convinced that Pen earns his happy ending, whereas the characters in The Newcomes pay in full for what happiness they get.) When she rejects Farintosh, apologizing for her falsehood, he makes it clear just how bad her conduct has been:

'Yes, it was a falsehood!' the poor lad cried out. 'You follow a fellow, and you make a fool of him, and you make him frantic in love with you, and then you fling him over! I wonder you can look me in the face after such an infernal treason. You've done it to twenty fellows before, I know you have. Everybody said so, and warned me. You draw them on, and get them to be in love, and then you fling them away.' (799)

Ethel has learned that it is one thing to admit you are a coquette, and another and more painful experience to be told the same thing by one of your victims. The girl 'hath penance done, and penance more will do.' Even at the end, it is not clear whether she ever is united with Clive.

Clive's individual agony, which reaches tragic dimensions, is again intricately bound up with the social milieu. In many ways he is a passive victim of the world's values, for when he loses the girl he loves to society, he loses his will too. His is the story of how a man who is honest, generous and industrious can be reduced not to poverty merely, but to degradation and despair by the system of the Newcome world. Social pressures, in one way or another, have taken from him the woman he loves, caused him to marry one he despises, and induced him to abandon his art, the only occupation in which he can preserve his self-respect; and it is the failure of a worldly endeavour that finally makes him and his family the victims of such a harri-
dan as

the Campaigner. The human situation is fully realized in the context of the society which brings it about. The last chapters showing Clive in his complex misery in Boulogne and London are the logical culmination of the progress of the world as the rest of the novel has portrayed it.

But society is not the only culprit for this tragedy. Colonel Newcome has also a manifold responsibility. He is a saint whom we love and pity as a martyr; but he makes martyrs of others than himself. His very goodness induces an exaggerated sense of obligation in Clive which makes him disastrously follow his father's inclinations rather than his own. Good people who admire the colonel's character invest their savings and lose them in his hopelessly mis-managed financial venture. And friends are lost, and bitter enemies made, by his disproportionate sense of moral outrage against Barnes and Ethel. He is the well-meaning cause, emotionally, morally and financially, of Clive's predicament; and as Ethel has to do penance for her worldliness, so does he for his lack of it.

The colonel is indignant at Pendennis's suggestion that he does not know the world.

'Know the world, young man!' cries Newcome; "I should think if I don't know the world at my age, I never shall." And if he had lived to be as old as Jahlaleel a boy could still have cheated him. (327)

Such a man, however honest, generous and honourable he may be, has no business guiding anyone, at least in a society that sets traps like the Bundelcund Bank for just such innocents.

One of the unifying themes of the novel, in which Kew, Pendennis, and Florac, besides Clive and Ethel, are searching for some path other than the primrose one through the world, is that of mentors. In their

search for a guide, these characters are faced with the paradox that those who know the world seem tainted by it, and those whom they would like to follow do not know the way themselves. Innocence is a precious quality in an individual, but it is baleful when it seeks to be an influence. Colonel Newcome, Madame de Florac and Lady Walham, all saintly in themselves, lead their children into disaster. It is equally clear that Honeyman, Bayham, and Florac, who all propose themselves - for precept if not example too - as mentors for Clive, are hardly fit moral guides, for all their experience. The reformed prodigal like Kew is probably the only reliable guide, but his experience makes him like Cassandra, a figure who knows but cannot communicate. This problem of incommunicable experience is dramatically realized when Kew takes it upon him to give Ethel some good advice, while she is perusing a poison-pen letter that chronicles his misdemeanours of the past.

Ethel describes the encounter to Lady Kew:

'The letter was actually brought to me whilst his lordship was in the midst of his sermon.... I read it as he was making his speech ... He was good enough to advise me, and to make such virtuous pretty speeches, that if he had been a bishop he could not have spoke better, and as I thought the letter was a nice commentary on his lordship's sermon I gave it to him.... I don't think my Lord Kew will preach to me again for some time.' (441)

Advice is either wrong because it is immoral, or wrong because it is based on ignorance; and the best advice usually comes from a source that prevents belief. Each individual has to gain his own experience, and human beings remain isolated from one another. In the scene in Baden, where the men talking together after dark are defined only by the glow and movement of their cigars, there is an image for this isolation:

So every light in every booth yonder has a scheme of its own: every star above shines by itself; and each individual heart of ours goes on brightening with its own hopes, burning with its own desires, and quivering with its own pain. (378)

This emphasis on the experience that each man must achieve for himself is reinforced by the sympathy that is accorded to the prodigal. Such characters as Kew, Belsize and Florac are opposed on the one hand to the wrong-headed but right-hearted innocents like the colonel: and Kew, speaking for the prodigals to his saintly mother, tells her, "I have often thought, mother, that though our side was wrong, yours could not be altogether right" (495). On the other hand the honesty of these prodigals is favourably contrasted with the hypocrisy of the do-gooders, the self-righteous Mrs. Hobson Newcome, and Barnes, whose virtues are calculated and whose wild oats are sown discreetly. The same contrast is in operation as between Charles and Joseph Surface, or Tom Jones and Blifil.

The Newcomes is, like all Thackeray's novels, saturated with moral concern. Yet whenever he appears to be giving a straight sermon and a cohesive set of precepts, there will be some ironic twist by which the sermon might be seriously qualified, if not invalidated. At times he inveighs against the marriage market, even to the point of fanaticism, suggesting that love is the only valid motive for marriage. And then he allows his mouthpiece, Kew, to dismiss this notion as folly, only "good for romances and misses to sigh about." Lasting romantic love may be the supreme lot, "But that is the lot which the gods only grant to Baucis and Philemon, and a very, very few besides. As for the rest, they must compromise; make themselves as comfortable as they can, and take the good and the bad together" (392). Laura,

so far as Pendennis and perhaps Thackeray are concerned, is an angel. But then we find for others - again perhaps including Thackeray - Laura is simply a domineering woman, and Pendennis henpecked. "What virtue, my friend!" exclaims Florac ironically, when he sees Pen on one of Laura's enterprises; "One sees well that your wife had made you the sermon. My poor Pendennis! You are henpecked, my pauvre bon! You become the husband model" (760). Similarly, after he has enlisted our sympathies with the colonel in the family feud, Pendennis suddenly produces a defence, and a good one too, of Barnes (711).

An example of Thackeray's ability to wipe out the distinctions he has made is his comparison between the two grandmothers who seem in all respects total opposites:

Between two such women as Madame de Florac and Lady Kew, of course there could be little liking or sympathy. Religion, love, duty, the family, were the French lady's constant occupation, - duty and family, perhaps, Lady Kew's aim too, - only the notions of duty were different in either person. Lady Kew's idea of duty to her relatives being to push them on in the world: Madame de Florac's to soothe, to pray, to attend them with constant watchfulness, to strive to mend them with pious counsel. I don't know that one lady was happier than the other. (607)⁵

Thackeray's method is to differentiate minutely between characters, actions and motives, in terms of class, of moral values, of psychological drives; and then by an adjustment in perspective to reduce the differences to minor proportions as his widened vision comprehends the touch of nature that makes even Lady Kew and Madame de Florac kin. He deals in contrasts and distinctions, but he shows how they are yoked together.

Such a moralist as George Eliot is in many ways far more sophisticated than Thackeray in the analysis of moral issues and of her characters' responses to them. But her values are firmly estab-

lished, and Dorothea Brook^e's or Gwendolen Harleth's growth to moral consciousness can be only in one direction. Thackeray does not attempt the internal examination of his characters' consciousness: they are defined in terms of externals, of their words and their actions, and he deals in relatively simpler moral alternatives for this reason. But as soon as he has set up some precept that may seem sufficiently obvious, such as that Laura's values are the only true ones, he juxtaposes the opposite point of view. This ironic juxtaposition sets off a series of vibrations, as new sets of possibilities in combinations and compromises, that leave it to the reader to extract synthesis from antithesis.

The ironic trick of dodging from one side to the other, or changing perspective so that distinctions between issues are eliminated, does not reflect mere indecision, and it is not an evasion of responsibility. Rather it is a means of conveying the complexity of the moral life. James in his novels shows characters elaborately concerned with moral issues, and he achieves a similar effect of complexity by not stating exactly what these issues are, and leaving the reader to define them. "My values are positively all blanks," he said.⁶ A more modern novelist like Joyce, being more concerned with motivational drives that are beyond the control of the super-ego, has ceased to formulate morality in the distinct terms of good and bad familiar to the Victorian. Thackeray's ironic method is to formulate both, to dwell on the intricate distinctions between them, and then to "take the good and the bad together." They are not separable, since each derives its meaning from the other. It is "in the nature of such a simple soul as Thomas Newcome to see but

one side of a question" (818), but the ironist sees all sides.

Colonel Newcome is no more capable of duplicity, of playing a part other than himself, than he is of seeing more than one side of a question. But he has the defect of this virtue, too: for every human being has different roles to play; to apply a sentimental code of honour to financial matters, for instance, as he does, is folly which is in its way as damaging as Barnes' application of financial principles to domestic life. The playing of roles is a recurring motif in this novel about pretension and hypocrisy. Of course there are numbers of people who pretend to be richer or cleverer or more virtuous than they are: like Mrs. Hobson Newcome, the bluestocking who talks about the superiority of "men of genius" over "titled nobodies," while the peerage lies open on the table. But there is more detailed study of the way human beings live fragmentarily, and appear as one being in one situation, a different one in another. The extreme instance of this is the Duchess d'Ivry, who invents romantic roles for herself to play, and "perhaps a little exaggerated her heroine's parts" (445). She calls herself Mary Queen of Scots, and her various lovers have to play Bothwell, Rizzio and John Knox (412). She has become so encrusted with the various masks she has assumed that it seems there can be nothing genuine left inside except corruption. Honeyman is thought of by Sherrick as "a successful tragedian" (583). Barnes too is constantly seen as playing distinct roles which, though more genuine than the Duchesse d'Ivry's, are still assumed almost like stage costumes: "Sir Barnes ... was for awhile not the exasperated husband, or the affectionate brother, or the amiable grandson, but the shrewd, brisk

banker, engaged entirely with his business" (687). Barnes uses his poses, like that of the domestic martyr who lectures on "the poetry of the affections" as part of his political campaign, for his own benefit. For diplomatic reasons, too, Mrs. Mackenzie plays an effusively affectionate mother in public, while she is spiteful and tyrannous in private. Such people play roles to achieve greatness, but others have their greatness thrust upon them, and parts are meted out to them which they are incompetent to play. So we are shown the "poor princess" in her glittering apartments, and the absurd fuss that is made about Sarah Mason, who, though she has reached senility and knows little of what is going on around her, is made a central figure in Newcome politics.⁷ Assuming a role can be a defensive reaction. Ethel protects herself from her love for Clive by telling him that their relationship should be that of "brother and sister;" and Clive relieves his frustration by playing the same fraternal part to the adoring Rosey (592). Thackeray is constantly concerned to illuminate the multiple facets of a character, and to show the differences between a man and his personae. His characters protect themselves from reality by erecting a façade, assuming roles which themselves become a kind of reality. They might well exclaim with the author of The Virginians, "O let us be thankful, not only for faces, but for masks!" (Vns, 577).

This view of his characters as actors playing roles has its stylistic counterpart in the constant allusion to fable, fairy-tale and romance through the novel. "Mr. Newcome's grandfather came to London with a satchel on his back, like Whittington. Isn't it

FAMILY SECRETS.



HE figure cowering over the furtive teapot glowered grimly at Barnes as he entered; and an old voice said — “Ho, it’s you!”

“I have brought you the notes, ma’am,” says Barnes, taking a packet of those documents from his pocket-book. “I could not come sooner, I have been engaged upon bank business until now.”

“I dare say! You smell of smoke like a courier.”

Lady Kew as a witch, conjuring up Prince Farintosh as a husband for Ethel. The Newcomes, 681.

romantic?" (420). This, in the fairy-tale view, is the beginning of the Newcome family. The frequency of such allusions gives distinctive texture to the book. Colonel Newcome himself is a Don Quixote, and he trails with him all the ironic potentialities, all the intricate variations between illusion and reality, that belong to the knight of La Mancha. Scott's characters and incidents are often invoked. We hear for instance that Clive in his days of prosperity "was always greatly delighted with that Scotch man-at-arms in Quentin Durward, who twists off an inch or two of gold chain to treat a friend and pay for a bottle. He would give a comrade a ring or a fine jewelled pin, if he had no money" (303).⁸ An incident from Ivanhoe is the subject of one of his grandiose paintings which is rejected by the British Institution. Florac is another admirer of "Valtare Scott," and enjoys playing Ravenswood to his servant's Caleb Balderstone (353).

Lady Kew is constantly described as a witch, and is depicted as one in Doyle's illustrations. She is quite proud of the character - "I am an old witch, and know numbers of things," she boasts (398). When she brews tea she gives the impression that she is concocting spells, and she has a malign influence over the people in her care: "She dries 'em up, and poisons 'em" (575). Lady Kew is the one character who is constantly seen in these terms. But different situations and relationships are also seen fleetingly in the bright colours and rosey glamour of fairy-tale. We hear the Colonel Newcome and Mrs. Mackenzie have a "kind scheme ... that their young ones should marry and be happy ever after, like the prince and princess in the fairy-tale" (332). Or a paragraph will begin, "We read in

fairy-stories [of] the king and queen who lived once upon a time" (135), to introduce another of the many incongruous analogies between fairy-tale and middle-class Victorian England.

The allusions are in ironic counterpoint to the main theme, for the world of the Newcomes is no fairyland. Their marriages no more allow them to "live happily ever after" than does Clive's to Rosey. And their rise to fortune, however like Dick Whittington's, is hardly "romantic."

The "Overture" and the epilogue of beast fables set the whole novel within an ironic framework. Certain of the animals in the prologue have recognizable traits of characters in the novel: the owl talks like Mrs. Hobson Newcome, the donkey in a lion's skin would be Farintosh, the lamb that beds with a wolf is Lady Clara Pulleyn, the wolf in sheep's clothing of course would be Barnes himself. All these greedy or pretentious or hypocritical or foolish animals come by their deserts, in the manner familiar in Aesop or Lafontaine:

When the wolf in sheep's clothing heard the bellow of the ass in the lion's skin, fancying that the monarch of the forest was near, he ran away as fast as his disguise would let him. When the ox heard the noise he dashed round the meadow-ditch, and with one trample of his hoof squashed the frog who had been abusing him. When the crow saw the people with guns coming, he instantly dropped the cheese out of his mouth, and took to wing. When the fox saw the cheese drop, he immediately made a jump at it (for he knew the donkey's voice, and that his asinine bray was not a bit like his royal master's roar), and making for the cheese, fell into a steel-trap, which snapped off his tail; without which he was obliged to go into the world, pretending, forsooth, that it was the fashion not to wear tails any more; and the fox-party were better without 'em. (4)

Animal imagery all through the novel keeps this overture in mind; and finally there is a reprise of the theme in the epilogue. After

THE
NEWCOMES



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"The Frog bursts with wicked rage, the fox is caught in his trap, the lamb is rescued from the wolf, and so forth" (The Newcomes, 1009). Title page of The Newcomes.

the last dramatized event, the death of Colonel Newcome, Thackeray draws a line, and speaks in his own person: "As I write the last line with a rather sad heart, Pendennis and Laura, and Ethel and Clive fade away into fable-land" (1007). The sentimental, he realizes, will be anxious to hear of the happy endings in store for these characters; and so he briefly suggests the kind of ending that the sentimental require:

My belief then is, that in fable-land somewhere, Ethel and Clive are living most comfortably together. ... What about Sir Barnes Newcome ultimately? My impression is that he is married again, and it is my fervent hope that his present wife bullies him. Mrs. Mackenzie cannot have the face to keep that money which Clive paid over to her, beyond her lifetime; and will certainly leave it and her savings to little Tommy. I should not be surprised if Madame de Montcontour left a smart legacy to the Pendennis children; and Lord Kew stood god-father in case - in case Mr. and Mrs. Clive wanted such an article.... Anything you like happens in fable-land. Wicked folks die à propos (for instance, that death of Lady Kew was most artful, for if she had not died, don't you see that Ethel would have married Lord Farintosh the next week?) - annoying folks are got out of the way; the poor are rewarded - the upstarts are set down in fable-land, - the frog bursts with wicked rage, the fox is caught in his trap, the lamb is rescued from the wolf, and so forth, just in the nick of time. And the poet of fable-land rewards and punishes absolutely. (1008-9)

This phrase "in fable-land" becomes more ironically loaded with each repetition. For the whole action of the novel has been saying that the world of the Newcomes is not fable-land, any more than it is fairy-land. We have no dramatic depiction of the marriage of Clive and Ethel, because according to the reality of the main body of the novel it does not happen. Everyone would like to think of Barnes henpecked; but we know that Warrington's prediction for him is far more likely to represent the hard facts: "I look to see Sir Barnes Newcome prosper more and more. I make no doubt he will die an immense capitalist, and an exalted peer of this realm" (716).

Lady Kew certainly did die in the course of the novel in time to prevent Ethel's marriage to Farintosh; but not in time to allow her marriage to Clive. And the notion of Mrs. Mackenzie's leaving a legacy to Clive's son is quite ludicrously incredible.

"Anything you like happens in fable-land" - and that is the only place it does happen. "The poet of fable-land rewards and punishes absolutely" - but the principle at work in the novel is not poetic justice but rather poetic injustice. Virtue is certainly not rewarded materially: Colonel Newcome dies a pauper; if 'virtue is its own reward,' its wages are meagre enough, for Madame de Florac has no more spiritual contentment than Lady Kew: "I have been nearly fifty years dying" is her summary of her adult life (629). Even the concept of heavenly reward after death, the last resort of the canvasser for virtue, is treated with heavy irony. These are the glib words of her director: 'Not here, my daughter, is to be your happiness,' says the priest; 'whom Heaven loves it afflicts.' And he points out to her the agonies of suffering saints of her sex; assures her of their present beatitudes and glories; and is empowered to promise her a like reward. (608)

Vice is no more punished than virtue is rewarded. Perhaps 'crime does not pay,' but greed and hypocrisy and the selfish pursuit of one's own ends certainly do. "To push on in the crowd, every male or female struggler must use his shoulders. If a better place than yours presents itself just beyond your neighbour, elbow him and take it.... The proofs of the correctness of the above remarks I show in various members of the Newcome family" (95-6). This is what The Newcomes is about, rather than how "the fox is caught in his trap, the lamb is rescued from the wolf, and so forth." In the Newcome world, your vices are your assets. A bad temper such as Lady Kew's, which makes her feared and respected, is "one

of the most precious and fortunate gifts with which a gentleman or lady can be endowed" (427), and the man who "abuses the men and things which he uses ... is better served than more grateful persons" (482). The Newcome world is so far from being governed by justice than in it people like Barnes proceed from strength to strength, and from one reward to the next, while people like Clive and his father are crushed.

The animal imagery that is a connecting motif of the novel works in two ways. Much of it connects with the moral fables of the opening and closing pages; the beasts to which the human characters are compared are already anthropomorphic and humorous, and evoke a moral response. Madame de Florac is a pelican; Honeyman's fashion-following congregation are appropriately a flock of sheep; and the social "lions" are such as belong to children's tales rather than in the jungle. The sententious Warrington uses analogies from beast fables when he deplores Clive's preference for Ethel over Rosey: "The lad might ... be as happy as any young donkey that browses on this common of ours - but he must go and hee-haw after a zebra, forsooth!" (572). Such images present an ordered moral universe, in which behaviour can be classified as good or bad, clever or foolish.

But the animal imagery also suggests an amoral universe, the post-Darwinian view of nature as nothing more - or less - than a struggle for survival. These animals - and birds and snakes predominate here - are drawn not from Lafontaine or the bestiaries but from natural history, and they are divided not into good and bad but into predators and victims. Creditors and bailiffs "rush like vultures on their prey" (326); Lady Kew is an eagle, swooping on Farintosh, the lamb on whom she is to feed her eaglet, Ethel (609); Clive and Hoby

are again predatory birds, hunting the mouse Rosey (743), while Rosey before her mother is a bird before a boa-constrictor (935). We remember Balzac's description of "the social species:" animals, he says, "turn and rend each other - that is all. Men, too, rend each other; but their greater or less intelligence makes the struggle far more complicated." The increased complication of human society is not necessarily an asset. It is true that it can produce a Colonel Newcome, of whom his friend, the lawyer Binnie, can say, "If all men were like you, there'd be an end of both our trades; there would be no fighting and no soldiering; no rogues, and no magistrates to catch them" (113); but one can as easily imagine an animal population of herbivores; and the typical product of this world is Barnes, whom Warrington at least finds to be even baser than "Nature's rogues:"

'This man goes about his life business with a natural propensity for darkness and evil - as a bug crawls, and stings and stinks. I don't suppose the fellow feels any more remorse than a cat that runs away with a mutton chop.... He seduced a poor girl in his father's country town - is it not natural? deserted her and her children - don't you recognize the beast? married for rank - could you expect otherwise from him? invites my Lord Highgate to his house in consideration of his balance at the bank; - sir, unless somebody's heel shall crunch him on the way, there is no height to which this aspiring vermin mayn't crawl. I look to see Sir Barnes Newcome prosper more and more. I make no doubt he will die an immense capitalist, and an exalted peer of this realm." (716)

This is the main stream of evolution in English society.

And yet - is The Newcomes really so despairing a novel? It is of the nature of an ironic work that we must be perpetually making qualifications as we expound its themes. And indeed there is a sense in which the fairy-tale element in the novel has its own validity, and the world of imagination is a real world. J.J. Ridley, the pale and sickly lad who is short-sighted, but who can conceive wonder and heroism



J.J. in Dreamland

"To [J.J.] splendours of Nature were revealed to vulgar sights invisible, and beauties manifest in forms, colours, shadows of common objects, where most of the world saw only what was dull, and gross, and familiar" (The Newcomes, 160).

and tenderness in his imagination, and realize them in his creations, is a greater painter than Clive, who can only paint what he sees. To J.J. "splendours of Nature were revealed to vulgar sights invisible, and beauties manifest in forms, colours, shadows of common objects, where most of the world saw only what was dull, and gross and familiar" (160). Early in the novel there is a long passage devoted to the workings of young J.J.'s imagination as he listens to little Miss Cann playing the piano.

Old and weazened as the piano is, feeble and cracked as is her voice, it is wonderful what a pleasant concert she can give in that parlour of a Saturday evening, to Mrs. Ridley, who generally dozes a good deal, and to a lad, who listens with all his soul, with tears sometimes in his great eyes, with crowding fancies filling his brain, and throbbing at his heart, as the artist plies her humble instrument.... Piano, pianissimo! the city is hushed. It is Fancy Street - Poetry Street - Imagination Street- the street where lovely ladies look from balconies; where cavaliers strike mandolins and draw swords and engage; where long processions pass and venerable hermits, with long beards, bless the kneeling people.... All these delights and sights, and joys and glories, these thrills of sympathy, movements of unknown longing, and visions of beauty, a young and sickly lad of eighteen enjoys in a little dark room where there is a bed disguised in the shape of a wardrobe, and a little old woman is playing under a gas-lamp on the jingling keys of an old piano. (153)

Doyle's illustration for this scene, evoking the 'little dark room' in contrast to J.J.'s bright and airy visions, was the one that Thackeray chose as the frontispiece for the first edition. It is an image for the contradictions that are at work in the novel, and we should hesitate before we dismiss the visions as "mere fancy," or confirm the dreary actualities as what is "real." For the two are complementary, and each is defined in terms of the other. Nature is not all red in tooth and claw, and concepts like decency and honour exist and operate even in a world where the Barnes Newcomes prosper. Colonel Newcome is crushed, but we have sympathy for him; and Clive and Ethel are perhaps married

after all.

"There was once a time," so begins the main narrative of The Newcomes,

when the sun used to shine brighter than it appears to do in this latter half of the nineteenth century; when the zest of life was certainly keener; when tavern wines seemed to be delicious, and tavern dinners the perfection of cookery.... It was in the days of my own youth, then, that I met one or two of the characters who are to figure in this history. (6-7)

This voice is to recur through the novel, which, we hear, is "written maturely and at ease, long after the voyage is over, whereof it recounts the adventures and perils" (296). It is the voice of a man who is able to shift the perspective from the close-up view of the young man to the distanced vision of the old. So we hear of Kew's youthful misdemeanours from a point in time twenty-five years later, when he is a staid and conscientious lord of the manor (137). This perspective can vividly evoke the ironies that are implicit in the progression of time and mutability: a single image of a kind that is constantly recurring is that of Terribile, the Italian valet Clive hires when he is an art student in Rome.

Terribile the valet becomes Terribile the model. He has figured on a hundred canvases ere this, and almost ever since he was born. All his family were models. His mother having been a Venus, is now a witch of Endor. His father is in the patriarchal line: he has himself done the cherubs, the shepherd-boys, and now is a grown man, and ready as a warrior, a pifferaro, a Capuchin, or what you will. (469)

This reminiscential narrator is always considering and contrasting what men have been in relation to what they are and what they are to become through a long span of time. Constancy within this flux can itself become ironic, as is the love of Thomas Newcome and Léonore which still endures through half a century, and which finds a new

outlet in their projection of themselves and their loves to Clive and Ethel. Pendennis, who at twenty-two felt older than the colonel, has in later life a range of sympathy that comprehends the young and the old and their relations with each other.

This old fogey often enough indulges in nostalgia for the good old days, the coaching age of "merry England," "before steam-engines arose and flung its hostelry and its chivalry over" (137). The days of chivalry are the days of fairy-tale and romance; and the point of view of the narrator, an old man recalling the joy and vividness of youth, corresponds with the opposition in the novel of fairy-tale and fable to unromantic and almost brutal fact; and the relation between youth and age is another of the thematic tensions of the novel; tensions between innocence and experience, self and persona, illusion and reality. Was the joy, though past, real? or is it the romantic figment of the old man's imagination, a creation rather than a recollection? Is the epithet "Quixotic," so readily applicable to Colonel Newcome, laudatory or pejorative? Does fable-land have its own reality that is co-existent with that of the social jungle? Is there a final Reality to be extracted from among the illusions? The universe of The Newcomes exists in terms of tensions between opposites. The ambiguities which invite but defy solution continue to reverberate through the novel.

CONCLUSION

Tristram Shandy, contemplating the multiplicity of "circumstances with which everything in this world is begirt,"¹ is frequently in an agony of perplexity as to which, of several things which must be said next, should be said first. Life is so manifold an experience that an idea cannot exist in isolation: a series of qualifications and extensions radiate from it, composing an intricate fabric of which it is an integral and inextricable part. How this complex pattern can be formulated in the linear progression of words is the problem of Tristram and of every literary artist.

The ironist's solution is to make his words say several things at once. And it is through irony that Thackeray can suggest the multiplicity of the strands spun by the human consciousness that make up the fabric of experience. To pick out and follow any one of these strands - to develop a single train of thought, to be doctrinaire - this is not his characteristic procedure, since for him it would constitute a distortion of the fabric. To take all things into account is a necessary part of the pursuit of truth; and for Thackeray truth consists rather in a balance of opposing forces than a preponderance of any one of them.

I have shown how as an artist he is hesitant to assert the reality of the world he creates. Like Sidney's poet, "he nothing affirms, and therefore never lyeth." His representation of his

characters simultaneously as actual people and as fictitious fabrications reproduces the delicate balance between belief and disbelief that is the fictional experience. Similarly, in his authorial commentary he provides the reader not with one but with ⁿmany responses to his characters and their actions in the world he creates.

His novels always illuminate the contradictions between the apparent and the latent. He dwells on the incongruity of the piety that is preached with the rapacity that is practised in society, on the contradictions in the moral life where good intentions turn to evil, and on the conflicting motives in the human psyche and the ambivalence of emotions in intimate relationships. His novels are rich and substantial with the sense they convey that there is always more going on than meets the eye.

These are the ironies that exist in the material of his novels. His manner of expressing them has the delicacy and subtlety that an ironist can infuse into words, for he is able to make them connote as well as denote, suggest as well as assert.

Chesterton, noting the connection between the complexity of life and the complexity of Thackeray's powers of suggestion, has his own way of analyzing his irony: "No novelist ever carried to such perfection as Thackeray the art of saying a thing without saying it. Human life is (so to speak) so dense with delicacies, so thickly sown with things that are true and yet may be understood, that this is a very valuable faculty

in a man telling tales about men." It is this ability to convey more than he says, his pervasive subtlety of complex suggestion, that makes Thackeray a great novelist.

NOTES

AND

BIBLIOGRAPHY

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

¹The Virginians, 577. My Thackeray references, which I incorporate in the text, are to The Oxford Thackeray, ed. George Saintsbury, by volume and page number. For convenience in referring to the major novels I give abbreviated titles, as follows:

BL - Barry Lyndon

Ph - Philip

HE - Henry Esmond

Pnd - Pendennis

Lov - Lovel the Widower

VF - Vanity Fair

Nc - The Newcomes

Vns - The Virginians

²See, for instance, Walter Jerrold's article of 1921, "Cynic or Sentimentalist?"

³Michael Sadleir, Bulwer, a Panorama. Edward and Rosina, 255. For an account of the varying biographical portraits of Thackeray see the "Introduction" to the first volume of Gordon Ray's definitive biography, Thackeray: the Uses of Adversity, and Thackeray: the Age of Wisdom, 1-9.

⁴Early Victorian Novelists, 98.

⁵"Pernicious Casuistry: a Study of Character in Vanity Fair," 139. John E. Tilford, Jr., in a defence of Thackeray against Fraser's attack, ends his article: "However else Thackeray might have reacted to all this critical to-do about Becky, he would, I suspect, have been greatly amused. After all, he knew a thing or two about irony." "The Degradation of Becky Sharp," 608.

⁶"A Note on Thackeray's Amelia."

⁷Thackeray: a Critical Portrait, 170-1.

⁸Review of Loofbourow's Thackeray and the Form of Fiction, 101.

⁹Some Versions of Pastoral, 54, 51-2.

¹⁰The Pattern of Hardy's Poetry, 41-2.

¹¹Mary Caroline Richards, "Thomas Hardy's Ironic Vision," ii, 21.

¹²The Well Wrought Urn, 75.

¹³For description of the classes of irony to which I refer, see G.G. Sedgewick, Of Irony, Especially in the Drama, 3-27. Also M.H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms, 45-7.

I: IRONY IN ARTISTIC ATTITUDE

- ¹Joyce's phrase for the remote and indifferent artist, Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, 254.
- ²For a detailed study of Thackeray's use of parody, see John Loofbourov's Thackeray and the Form of Fiction, where he shows how Thackeray used the "allusive textures" of various styles to evoke certain controlled responses.
- ³See Northrop Frye, The Anatomy of Criticism, 34.
- ⁴Thackeray the Novelist, 12.
- ⁵See John A. Lester, "Thackeray's Narrative Technique," 403.
- ⁶See A.E. Dyson "Vanity Fair, an Irony against Heroes."
- ⁷The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray, ed. Gordon N. Ray. My references in the text are to Letters, with volume and page number.
- ⁸12.
- ⁹"On Some Forms of Irony in Literature," 499.
- ¹⁰See J.Y.T. Grieg, who finds in this kind of repetition a tell-tale sign of Thackeray's over-indulgence in his own feelings. Thackeray: a Reconsideration, 11.
- ¹¹F.R. Leavis, The Great Tradition, 31.
- ¹²295.
- ¹³Trollope took Thackeray to task for the "idleness" which he considered was the cause of Thackeray's wandering stories. Thackeray, 137.
- ¹⁴The Claverings, 296.
- ¹⁵Early Victorian Novelists, 255.
- ¹⁶"W.M. Thackeray: In Memoriam," Cornhill Magazine, February, 1864, 130.
- ¹⁷An Apologie for Poetrie, ed. J. Churton Collins, 38-9.

- ¹⁸ I use the terms "dramatic" and "panoramic" in Percy Lubbock's sense. See The Craft of Fiction, 156 ff. Esmond, the only one of Thackeray's novels to be published as a whole, is also fully "dramatic," and therefore not subject to the strictures of post-Jamesian critics. I therefore exclude it, for the moment, from my consideration of Thackeray's narrative technique in order to concentrate on a defence of his "panoramic" novels.
- ¹⁹ "The Art of Fiction," 403.
- ²⁰ "Notes on the Novel," 85.
- ²¹ "Point of View in Fiction: the development of a critical concept," 126.
- ²² Time and the Novel, 111.
- ²³ E.g. see Joan Evans's letter to TLS, December 5, 1963: "I have been reading Vanity Fair once a year now for more years than I care to reckon." 1011.
- ²⁴ "The Newcomes," August 21, 1855.
- ²⁵ The English Novel: Form and Function, 139-40.
- ²⁶ An Introduction to the English Novel, I, 164.
- ²⁷ Russell A. Fraser does not take account of the worldly-wise tone that balances the sentimental when he accuses Thackeray of sentimentality in The Newcomes, nor of the fact that both tones are dramatic. "Sentimentality in Thackeray's The Newcomes."
- ²⁸ The English Novel: from the Earliest Days to the Death of Joseph Conrad, 144.
- ²⁹ The Craft of Fiction, 127.
- ³⁰ See Geoffrey Tillotson's chapter on "The Content of the Authorial 'I,'" Thackeray the Novelist, 55-70.
- ³¹ See J.A.K. Thomson for a discussion of the belief in the jealousy of the gods as the basis of much of the irony in Greek tragedy. Irony, an Historial Introduction, 10 ff.
- ³² Author's Preface to The Battle of the Books.
- ³³ Introduction to The Book of Snobs, ix.

- ³⁴ See Myron Taube, "Thackeray and the Reminiscent Vision," 256.
- ³⁵ See Russell A. Fraser, "Shooting Niagara in the Novels of Thackeray and Trollope."
- ³⁶ Geoffrey Tillotson cites "the conception of the frustrated middleaged male personage" as one of James's debts to Thackeray. Thackeray the Novelist, 299.
- ³⁷ Thackeray, 49.
- ³⁸ See on this Lambert Ennis: "It must be remembered that [Thackeray's] whole literary career after Vanity Fair was a retreat from his satirical position under pressure of the Victorian mistrust of satire." Thackeray: the Sentimental Cynic, 211.

II: IRONY IN THE SOCIAL UNIVERSE

- ¹ "Sterne and Thackeray," 324.
- ² "Thackeray," Victorian Essays, 82.
- ³ "Manners, Morals, and the Novel," 209-10.
- ⁴ Lambert Ennis points this out. Thackeray: the Sentimental Cynic, 115.
- ⁵ Roscoe, "William Makepeace Thackeray, Artist and Moralist," 274.
- ⁶ Quoted by Trilling in "Manners, Morals, and the Novel," 211. I have been unable to identify this quotation.
- ⁷ Roscoe first said that Thackeray was concerned with "man the social animal" rather than "man the individual soul." 267.
- ⁸ Author's introduction to The Human Comedy, I, lv.
- ⁹ (Letters, II, 309). Joseph Baker's article, "Vanity Fair and the Celestial City," locates Vanity Fair in the central stream of Christian teaching.

- ¹⁰ George Orwell points out Thackeray's skill in the moral definition of his characters: "Major Pendennis is a shallow old snob, and Rawdon Crawley is a thick-headed ruffian;... but what Thackeray realizes is that according to their tortuous code they are neither of them bad men. Major Pendennis would not sign a dud cheque, for instance. Rawdon certainly would, but on the other hand he would not desert a friend in a tight corner." "Charles Dickens," 76.
- ¹¹ Thackeray: the Uses of Adversity, 13, 379. See also Ray's excellent article, "Vanity Fair: one Version of the Novelist's Responsibility."
- ¹² Marlowe, Tamburlaine I, 1. 877f.
- ¹³ Introduction to The Virginians, xxiv.
- ¹⁴ Seven Types of Ambiguity, 23-4.
- ¹⁵ Roscoe, 265.

III: IRONY IN MORAL VISION

- ¹ Thackeray: the Uses of Adversity. Also in "Vanity Fair: one Version of the Novelist's Responsibility," 90-1.
- ² In the Times review of The Newcomes, which qualified its general praise by saying that "Mr. Thackeray ... is a great humourist, and we only regret that he is not a great moralist also."
- ³ It is true, however, that his worldly women, Becky, Blanche and Beatrix, are more sexually attractive than the domestic ones, and make more capital out of their physical advantages. But A.E. Dyson makes the point that Amelia herself is more sensual than Becky. "Vanity Fair: an Irony against Heroes," 20.
- ⁴ W.C.D. Pacey, "Balzac and Thackeray," 221.
- ⁵ See Letters, II, 784n.
- ⁶ See John E. Tilford, Jr., "The Degradation of Becky Sharp."
- ⁷ Roscoe, 299-300.
- ⁸ See Mark Spilka, "A Note on Thackeray's Amelia."
- ⁹ "Charles Dickens," 109.
- ¹⁰ See Letters, III, 468n.

IV: IRONY IN LOVE: AMBIVALENT RELATIONSHIPS

- ¹The Great Tradition, 31.
- ²"An Old Friend of the Family: Thackeray," 357.
- ³"Freud and Literature," 48.
- ⁴Thackeray: the Sentimental Cynic, 73.
- ⁵Totem and Taboo, 818.
- ⁶Freud, the Interpretation of Dreams, 265; Ernest Jones, Hamlet and Oedipus.
- ⁷The English Novel: Form and Function, 149.
- ⁸See Myron Taube: "Georgy becomes an unknowing lover for Amelia, an object of her worship." "The Character of Amelia in the Meaning of Vanity Fair," 6.
- ⁹Freud, "Three Contributions to a Theory of Sex," 617n.
- ¹⁰"Archetype and Signature," 464.
- ¹¹It is interesting to compare the pattern of Pen's loves with the pattern which Theodore Reik finds in The Tales of Hoffmann, of doll/mother, courtesan/siren, artist/death. "The Three Women in a Man's Life."
- ¹²Totem and Taboo, 854.
- ¹³In "The 'Unsavoury Plot' of Henry Esmond" and "The Love Theme of Henry Esmond."
- ¹⁴"Psychological Aspects of the Mother Archetype," 341.
- ¹⁵See T.H. White, The Book of Beasts: "The pelican is excessively devoted to its children. But when these have been born and begin to grow up, they flap their parents in the face with their wings, and the parents, striking back, kill them. Three days afterward the mother pierces her breast, opens her side, and lays herself across her young, pouring her blood over the dead bodies. This brings them to life again." 132.
- ¹⁶Thackeray: the Sentimental Cynic.
- ¹⁷See Letters, IV, 272, and Judges, 11, 38.
- ¹⁸The Craft of Fiction, 95.

V: HENRY ESMOND: DRAMATIC IRONY

¹"The 'Unsavoury Plot' of Henry Esmond."

²See Wright, "Irony and Fiction," 116.

³"Dramatic Irony in Henry Esmond."

⁴For discussion of this aspect of Henry Esmond see especially Talon's "Time and Memory in Thackeray's Henry Esmond," 147, and John Loofbourow's Thackeray and the Form of Fiction, 125ff.

⁵See Worth, "The Unity of Henry Esmond."

⁶Ibid.

⁷See Talon, 154.

⁸The italics are mine.

⁹Thackeray, a Critical Portrait, 170-1.

VI: THE NEWCOMES: "RESPECTABILITY"

¹Culture and Anarchy, 157.

²For the development of the concept of "class," which in the nineteenth century replaced that of "rank," see Raymond Williams, Culture and Society, 1780-1950, 14-15.

³Pendennis and The Rose and the Ring both begin with a memorable and definitive breakfast.

⁴See Letters, III, 149, 284.

⁵The italics are mine.

⁶The Art of the Novel, 177.

⁷Russell A. Fraser, who finds the treatment of Sarah Mason sentimental, overlooks - here as elsewhere - the satire that salts the sentiment. "Sentimentality in Thackeray's The Newcomes," 191.

⁸This gesture is ironically recalled when Colonel Newcome gives a brooch to his grandchild's nurse, as a sign not of careless affluence but of poverty: "I had no money to give her - no, not a single rupee," he says (936).

CONCLUSION

¹Sterne, Tristram Shandy, III, ii, 158.

²Introduction to Masters of English Literature: Thackeray, xxii.

KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

<u>BL</u>	<u>Barry Lyndon</u>
<u>EA</u>	<u>Études Anglaises</u>
ed.	editor
<u>EIC</u>	<u>Essays in Criticism</u>
<u>ELH</u>	<u>Journal of English Literary History</u>
<u>HE</u>	<u>Henry Esmond</u>
<u>JEGP</u>	<u>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</u>
<u>Lov</u>	<u>Lovel the Widower</u>
<u>MLN</u>	<u>Modern Language Notes</u>
<u>MLQ</u>	<u>Modern Language Quarterly</u>
<u>MLR</u>	<u>Modern Language Review</u>
<u>MP</u>	<u>Modern Philology</u>
<u>NC</u>	<u>Nineteenth Century</u>
<u>Nc</u>	<u>The Newcomes</u>
<u>NCF</u>	<u>Nineteenth Century Fiction</u>
<u>N&Q</u>	<u>Notes and Queries</u>
<u>Ph</u>	<u>Philip</u>
<u>Pnd</u>	<u>Pendennis</u>
<u>PMLA</u>	<u>Publications of the Modern Language Association of America</u>
<u>PQ</u>	<u>Philological Quarterly</u>
<u>REL</u>	<u>Review of English Literature</u>
<u>RES</u>	<u>Review of English Studies</u>
<u>TLS</u>	<u>[London] Times Literary Supplement</u>
<u>VF</u>	<u>Vanity Fair</u>
<u>VN</u>	<u>Victorian Newsletter</u>
<u>Vns</u>	<u>The Virginians</u>

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